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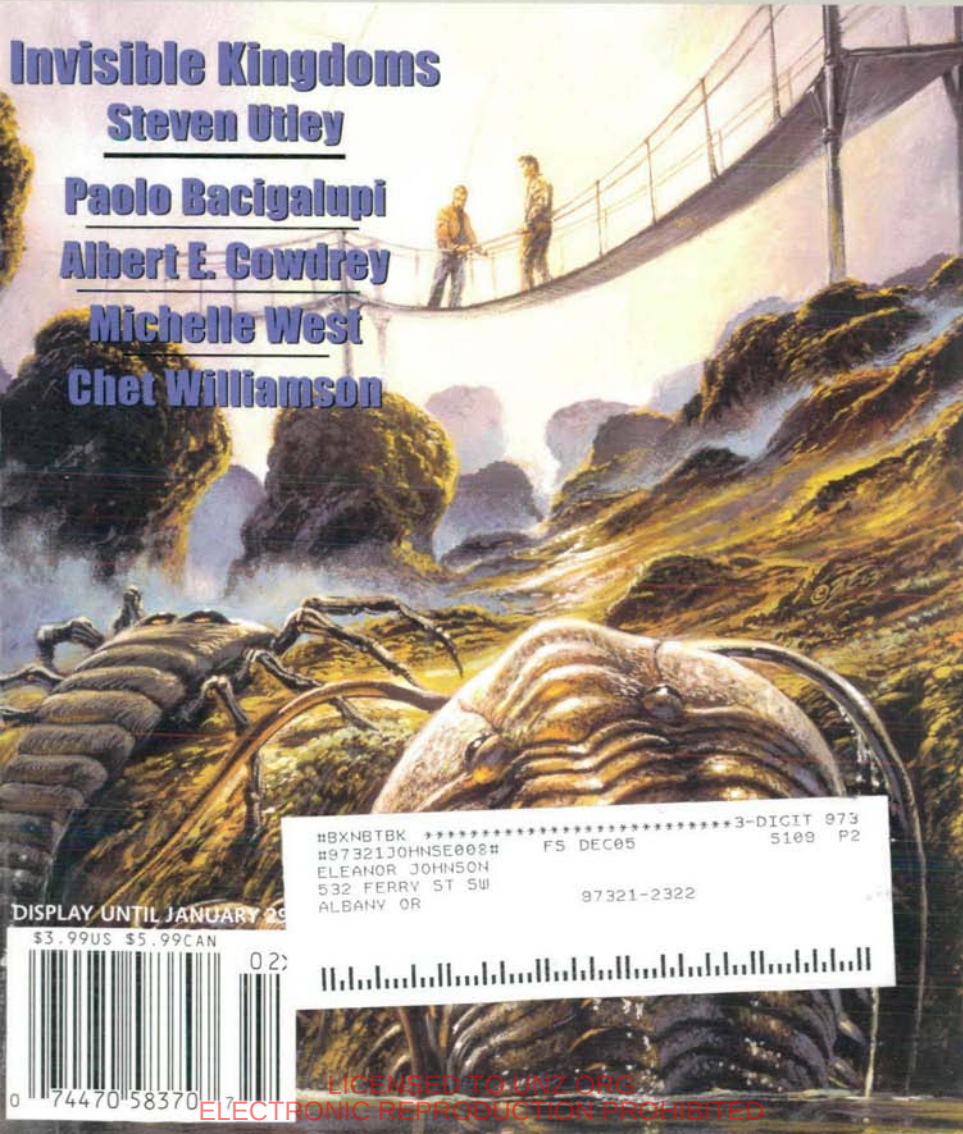

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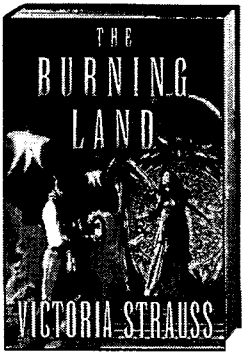

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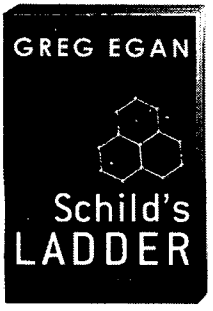

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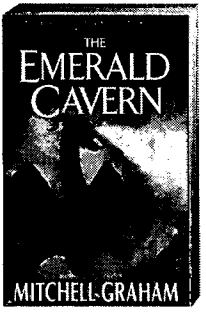

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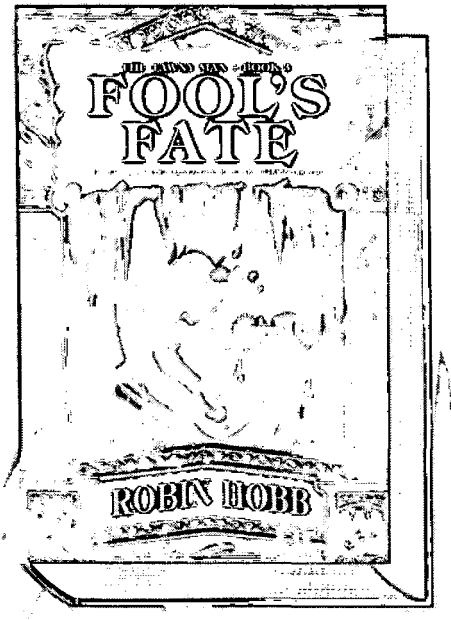

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Paolo Bacigalupi's two past appearances in F&SF *were both memorable stories: "Pocketful of Dharma" in our Feb. 1999 issue and "The Fluted Girl" last June. His new one is another wonder, an extrapolation that grew out of a discussion Paolo had with a colleague who opined that we don't need to conserve gas or recycle because human ingenuity is so strong that we'll come up with scientific solutions for all our problems. What if he's right?*

Mr. Bacigalupi lives in Colorado with his wife. They're expecting their first son shortly before this issue comes off the presses. What brave new world awaits him?

The People of Sand and Slag

By Paolo Bacigalupi

"HOSTILE MOVEMENT! WELL inside the perimeter! Well inside!"

I stripped off my Immersive Response goggles as adrenaline surged through me. The virtual cityscape I'd been about to raze disappeared, replaced by our monitoring room's many views of SesCo's mining operations. On one screen, the red phosphorescent tracery of an intruder skated across a terrain map, a hot blip like blood spattering its way toward Pit 8.

Jaak was already out of the monitoring room. I ran for my gear.

I caught up with Jaak in the equipment room as he grabbed a TS-101 and slashbangs and dragged his impact exoskeleton over his tattooed body. He draped bandoleers of surgepacks over his massive shoulders and ran for the outer locks. I strapped on my own exoskeleton, pulled my 101 from its rack, checked its charge, and followed.

Lisa was already in the HEV, its turbofans screaming like banshees when the hatch dilated. Sentry centaurs leveled their 101's at me, then relaxed as friend/foe data spilled into their heads-up displays. I bolted across the tarmac, my skin pricking under blasts of icy Montana wind and

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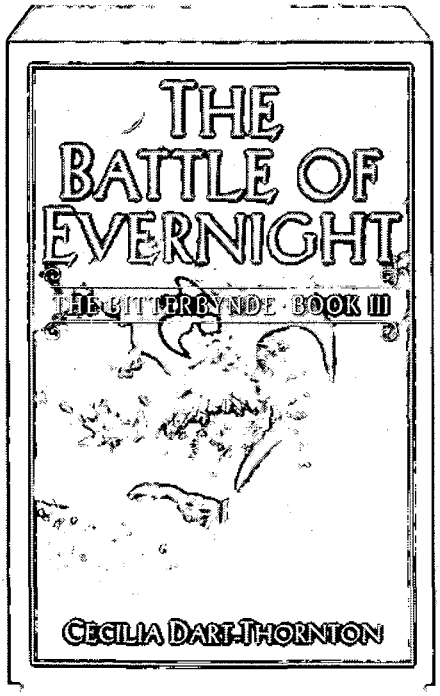

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the jet wash of Hentasa Mark V engines. Overhead, the clouds glowed orange with light from SesCo's mining bots.

"Come on, Chen! Move! Move! Move!"

I dove into the hunter. The ship leaped into the sky. It banked, throwing me against a bulkhead, then the Hentasas cycled wide and the hunter punched forward. The HEV's hatch slid shut. The wind howl muted.

I struggled forward to the flight cocoon and peered over Jaak's and Lisa's shoulders to the landscape beyond.

"Have a good game?" Lisa asked.

I scowled. "I was about to win. I made it to Paris."

We cut through the mists over the catchment lakes, skimming inches above the water, and then we hit the far shore. The hunter lurched as its anti-collision software jerked us away from the roughening terrain. Lisa overrode the computers and forced the ship back down against the soil, driving us so low I could have reached out and dragged my hands through the broken scree as we screamed over it.

Alarms yowled. Jaak shut them off as Lisa pushed the hunter lower. Ahead, a tailings ridge loomed. We ripped up its face and dropped sickeningly into the next valley. The Hentasas shuddered as Lisa forced them to the edge of their design buffer. We hurtled up and over another ridge. Ahead, the ragged cutscape of mined mountains stretched to the horizon. We dipped again into mist and skimmed low over another catchment lake, leaving choppy wake in the thick golden waters.

Jaak studied the hunter's scanners. "I've got it." He grinned. "It's moving, but slow."

"Contact in one minute," Lisa said. "He hasn't launched any countermeasures."

I watched the intruder on the tracking screens as they displayed real-time data fed to us from SesCo's satellites. "It's not even a masked target. We could have dropped a mini on it from base if we'd known he wasn't going to play hide-and-seek."

"Could have finished your game," Lisa said.

"We could still nuke him." Jaak suggested.

I shook my head. "No, let's take a look. Vaporizing him won't leave us anything and Bunbaum will want to know what we used the hunter for."

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URSULA K. LE GUIN is the translator of award-winning Argentinean writer ANGÉLICA GORODISCHER's novel *Kalpa Imperial:* the imaginary history of a fabled, nameless empire. Beggars become emperors, democracies become dictatorships, and history becomes legends and stories.

It's always difficult to wrap up a rave review without babbling redundant praises. This time I'll simply say "Buy this Book!"—*Locus*

The dreamy, ancient voice is not unlike Le Guin's, and this collection should appeal to her fans as well as to those of literary fantasy and Latin American fiction.—*Library Journal*

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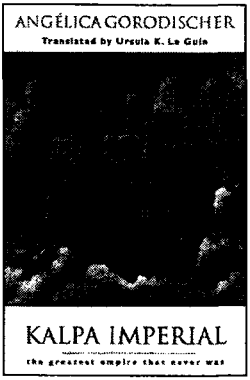

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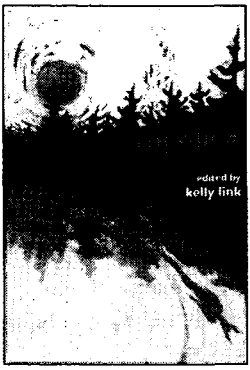

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"Thirty seconds."

"He wouldn't care if someone hadn't taken the hunter on a joyride to Cancun."

Lisa shrugged. "I wanted to swim. It was either that, or rip off your kneecaps."

The hunter lunged over another series of ridges.

Jaak studied his monitor. "Target's moving away. He's still slow. We'll get him."

"Fifteen seconds to drop," Lisa said. She unstrapped and switched the hunter to software. We all ran for the hatch as the HEV yanked itself skyward, its auto pilot desperate to tear away from the screaming hazard of the rocks beneath its belly.

We plunged out the hatch, one, two, three, falling like Icarus. We slammed into the ground at hundreds of kilometers per hour. Our exoskeletons shattered like glass, flinging leaves into the sky. The shards fluttered down around us, black metallic petals absorbing our enemy's radar and heat detection while we rolled to jarred vulnerable stops in muddy scree.

The hunter blew over the ridge, Hentasas shrieking, a blazing target. I dragged myself upright and ran for the ridge, my feet churning through yellow tailings mud and rags of jaundiced snow. Behind me, Jaak was down with smashed arms. The leaves of his exoskeleton marked his roll path, a long trail of black shimmering metal. Lisa lay a hundred yards away, her femur rammed through her thigh like a bright white exclamation mark.

I reached the top of the ridge and stared down into the valley.

Nothing.

I dialed up the magnification of my helmet. The monotonous slopes of more tailings rubble spread out below me. Boulders, some as large as our HEV, some cracked and shattered by high explosives, shared the slopes with the unstable yellow shale and fine grit of waste materials from SesCo's operations.

Jaak slipped up beside me, followed a moment later by Lisa, her flight suit's leg torn and bloodied. She wiped yellow mud off her face and ate it as she studied the valley below. "Anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing yet. You okay?"

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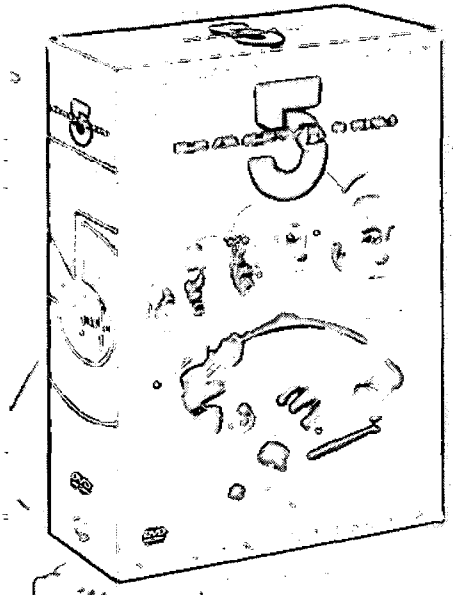

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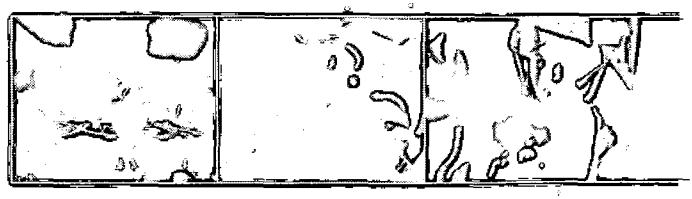

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"Clean break."

Jaak pointed. "There!"

Down in the valley, something was running, flushed by the hunter. It slipped along a shallow creek, viscous with tailings acid. The ship herded it toward us. Nothing. No missile fire. No slag. Just the running creature. A mass of tangled hair. Quadrupedal. Splattered with mud.

"Some kind of bio-job?" I wondered.

"It doesn't have any hands," Lisa murmured.

"No equipment either."

Jaak muttered. "What kind of sick bastard makes a bio-job without hands?"

I searched the nearby ridgelines. "Decoy, maybe?"

Jaak checked his scanner data, piped in from the hunter's more aggressive instruments. "I don't think so. Can we put the hunter up higher? I want to look around."

At Lisa's command, the hunter rose, allowing its sensors a fuller reach. The howl of its turbofans became muted as it gained altitude.

Jaak waited as more data spat into his heads-up display. "Nope, nothing. And no new alerts from any of the perimeter stations, either. We're alone."

Lisa shook her head. "We should have just dropped a mini on it from base."

Down in the valley, the bio-job's headlong run slowed to a trot. It seemed unaware of us. Closer now, we could make out its shape: A shaggy quadruped with a tail. Dreadlocked hair dangled from its shanks like ornaments, tagged with tailings mud clods. It was stained around its legs from the acids of the catchment ponds, as though it had forded streams of urine.

"That's one ugly bio-job," I said.

Lisa shouldered her 101. "Bio-melt when I'm done with it."

"Wait!" Jaak said. "Don't slag it!"

Lisa glanced over at him, irritated. "What now?"

"That's not a bio-job at all." Jaak whispered. "That's a dog."

He stood suddenly and jumped over the hillside, running headlong down the scree toward the animal.

"Wait!" Lisa called, but Jaak was already fully exposed and blurring to his top speed.

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The animal took one look at Jaak, whooping and hollering as he came roaring down the slope, then turned and ran. It was no match for Jaak. Half a minute later he overtook the animal.

Lisa and I exchanged glances. "Well," she said, "it's awfully slow if it's a bio-job. I've seen centaurs walk faster."

By the time we caught up with Jaak and the animal, Jaak had it cornered in a dull gully. The animal stood in the center of a trickling ditch of sludgy water, shaking and growling and baring its teeth at us as we surrounded it. It tried to break around us, but Jaak kept it corralled easily.

Up close, the animal seemed even more pathetic than from a distance, a good thirty kilos of snarling mange. Its paws were slashed and bloody and patches of fur were torn away, revealing festering chemical burns underneath.

"I'll be damned," I breathed, staring at the animal. "It really looks like a dog."

Jaak grinned. "It's like finding a goddamn dinosaur."

"How could it live out here?" Lisa's arm swept the horizon. "There's nothing to live on. It's got to be modified." She studied it closely, then glanced at Jaak. "Are you sure nothing's coming in on the perimeter? This isn't some kind of decoy?"

Jaak shook his head. "Nothing. Not even a peep."

I leaned in toward the creature. It bared its teeth in a rictus of hatred. "It's pretty beat up. Maybe it's the real thing."

Jaak said, "Oh yeah, it's the real thing all right. I saw a dog in a zoo once. I'm telling you, this is a dog."

Lisa shook her head. "It can't be. It would be dead, if it were a real dog."

Jaak just grinned and shook his head. "No way. Look at it." He reached out to push the hair out of the animal's face so that we could see its muzzle.

The animal lunged and its teeth sank into Jaak's arm. It shook his arm violently, growling as Jaak stared down at the creature latched onto his flesh. It yanked its head back and forth, trying to tear Jaak's arm off. Blood spurted around its muzzle as its teeth found Jaak's arteries.

Jaak laughed. His bleeding stopped. "Damn. Check that out." He

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lifted his arm until the animal dangled fully out of the stream, dripping. "I got me a pet."

The dog swung from the thick bough of Jaak's arm. It tried to shake his arm once again, but its movements were ineffectual now that it hung off the ground. Even Lisa smiled.

"Must be a bummer to wake up and find out you're at the end of your evolutionary curve."

The dog growled, determined to hang on.

Jaak laughed and drew his monomol knife. "Here you go, doggy." He sliced his arm off, leaving it in the bewildered animal's mouth.

Lisa cocked her head. "You think we could make some kind of money on it?"

Jaak watched as the dog devoured his severed arm. "I read somewhere that they used to eat dogs. I wonder what they taste like."

I checked the time in my heads-up display. We'd already killed an hour on an exercise that wasn't giving any bonuses. "Get your dog, Jaak, and get it on the hunter. We aren't going to eat it before we call Bunbaum."

"He'll probably call it company property," Jaak groused.

"Yeah, that's the way it always goes. But we still have to report. Might as well keep the evidence, since we didn't nuke it."

WE ATE SAND for dinner. Outside the security bunker, the mining robots rumbled back and forth, ripping deeper into the earth, turning it into a mush of tailings and rock acid that they left in exposed ponds when they hit the water table, or piled into thousand-foot mountainscapes of waste soil. It was comforting to hear those machines cruising back and forth all day. Just you and the bots and the profits, and if nothing got bombed while you were on duty, there was always a nice bonus.

After dinner we sat around and sharpened Lisa's skin, implanting blades along her limbs so that she was like a razor from all directions. She'd considered monomol blades, but it was too easy to take a limb off accidentally, and we lost enough body parts as it was without adding to the mayhem. That kind of garbage was for people who didn't have to work: aesthetes from New York City and California.

Lisa had a DermDecora kit for the sharpening. She'd bought it last

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time we'd gone on vacation and spent extra to get it, instead of getting one of the cheap knock-offs that were cropping up. We worked on cutting her skin down to the bone and setting the blades. A friend of ours in L.A said that he just held DermDecora parties so everyone could do their modifications and help out with the hard-to-reach places.

Lisa had done my glowspine, a sweet tracery of lime landing lights that ran from my tailbone to the base of my skull, so I didn't mind helping her out, but Jaak, who did all of his modification with an old-time scar and tattoo shop in Hawaii, wasn't so pleased. It was a little frustrating because her flesh kept trying to close before we had the blades set, but eventually we got the hang of it, and an hour later, she started looking good.

Once we finished with Lisa's front settings, we sat around and fed her. I had a bowl of tailings mud that I drizzled into her mouth to speed her integration process. When we were weren't feeding her, we watched the dog. Jaak had shoved it into a makeshift cage in one corner of our common room. It lay there like it was dead.

Lisa said, "I ran its DNA. It really is a dog."

"Bunbaum believe you?"

She gave me a dirty look. "What do you think?"

I laughed. At SesCo, tactical defense responders were expected to be fast, flexible, and deadly, but the reality was our SOP was always the same: drop nukes on intruders, slag the leftovers to melt so they couldn't regrow, hit the beaches for vacation. We were independent and trusted as far as tactical decisions went, but there was no way SesCo was going to believe its slag soldiers had found a dog in their tailings mountains.

Lisa nodded. "He wanted to know how the hell a dog could live out here. Then he wanted to know why we didn't catch it sooner. Wanted to know what he pays us for." She pushed her short blond hair off her face and eyed the animal. "I should have slagged it."

"What's he want us to do?"

"It's not in the manual. He's calling back."

I studied the limp animal. "I want to know how it was surviving. Dogs are meat eaters, right?"

"Maybe some of the engineers were giving it meat. Like Jaak did."

Jaak shook his head. "I don't think so. The sucker threw up my arm

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almost right after he ate it." He wiggled his new stump where it was rapidly regrowing. "I don't think we're compatible for it."

I asked, "But we could eat it, right?"

Lisa laughed and took a spoonful of tailings. "We can eat anything. We're the top of the food chain."

"Weird how it can't eat us."

"You've probably got more mercury and lead running through your blood than any pre-weeviltech animal ever could have had."

"That's bad?"

"Used to be poison."

"Weird."

Jaak said, "I think I might have broken it when I put it in the cage." He studied it seriously. "It's not moving like it was before. And I heard something snap when I stuffed it in."

"So?"

Jaak shrugged. "I don't think it's healing."

The dog did look kind of beat up. It just lay there, its sides going up and down like a bellows. Its eyes were half-open, but didn't seem to be focused on any of us. When Jaak made a sudden movement, it twitched for a second, but it didn't get up. It didn't even growl.

Jaak said, "I never thought an animal could be so fragile."

"You're fragile, too. That's not such a big surprise."

"Yeah, but I only broke a couple bones on it, and now look at it. It just lies there and pants."

Lisa frowned thoughtfully. "It doesn't heal." She climbed awkwardly to her feet and went to peer into the cage. Her voice was excited. "It really is a dog. Just like we used to be. It could take weeks for it to heal. One broken bone, and it's done for."

She reached a razored hand into the cage and sliced a thin wound into its shank. Blood oozed out, and kept oozing. It took minutes for it to begin clotting. The dog lay still and panted, clearly wasted.

She laughed. "It's hard to believe we ever lived long enough to evolve out of that. If you chop off its legs, they won't regrow." She cocked her head, fascinated. "It's as delicate as rock. You break it, and it never comes back together." She reached out to stroke the matted fur of the animal. "It's as easy to kill as the hunter."

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The comm buzzed. Jaak went to answer.

Lisa and I stared at the dog, our own little window into pre-history.

Jaak came back into the room. "Bunbaum's flying out a biologist to take a look at it."

"You mean a bio-engineer," I corrected him.

"Nope. Biologist. Bunbaum said they study animals."

Lisa sat down. I checked her blades to see if she'd knocked anything loose. "There's a dead-end job."

"I guess they grow them out of DNA. Study what they do. Behavior, shit like that."

"Who hires them?"

Jaak shrugged. "Pau Foundation has three of them on staff. Origin of life guys. That's who's sending out this one. Mushi-something. Didn't get his name."

"Origin of life?"

"Sure, you know, what makes us tick. What makes us alive. Stuff like that."

I poured a handful of tailings mud into Lisa's mouth. She gobbled it gratefully. "Mud makes us tick," I said.

Jaak nodded at the dog. "It doesn't make that dog tick."

We all looked at the dog. "It's hard to tell what makes it tick."

Lin Musharraf was a short guy with black hair and a hooked nose that dominated his face. He had carved his skin with swirling patterns of glow implants, so he stood out as cobalt spirals in the darkness as he jumped down from his chartered HEV.

The centaurs went wild about the unauthorized visitor and corralled him right up against his ship. They were all over him and his DNA kit, sniffing him, running their scanners over his case, pointing their 101's into his glowing face and snarling at him.

I let him sweat for a minute before calling them away. The centaurs backed off, swearing and circling, but didn't slag him. Musharraf looked shaken. I couldn't blame him. They're scary monsters: bigger and faster than a man. Their behavior patches make them vicious, their sentience upgrades give them the intelligence to operate military equipment, and their basic fight/flight response is so impaired that they only know how

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to attack when they're threatened. I've seen a half-slagged centaur tear a man to pieces barehanded and then join an assault on enemy ridge fortifications, dragging its whole melted carcass forward with just its arms. They're great critters to have at your back when the slag starts flying.

I guided Musharraf out of the scrum. He had a whole pack of memory addendums blinking off the back of his skull: a fat pipe of data retrieval, channeled direct to the brain, and no smash protection. The centaurs could have shut him down with one hard tap to the back of the head. His cortex might have grown back, but he wouldn't have been the same. Looking at those blinking triple fins of intelligence draping down the back of his head, you could tell he was a typical lab rat. All brains, no survival instincts. I wouldn't have stuck mem-adds into my head even for a triple bonus.

"You've got a dog?" Musharraf asked when we were out of reach of the centaurs.

"We think so." I led him down into the bunker, past our weapons racks and weight rooms to the common room where we'd stored the dog. The dog looked up at us as we came in, the most movement it had made since Jaak put it in the cage.

Musharraf stopped short and stared. "Remarkable."

He knelt in front of the animal's cage and unlocked the door. He held out a handful of pellets. The dog dragged itself upright. Musharraf backed away, giving it room, and the dog followed stiff and wary, snuffling after the pellets. It buried its muzzle in his brown hand, snorting and gobbling at the pellets.

Musharraf looked up. "And you found it in your tailings pits?"

"That's right."

"Remarkable."

The dog finished the pellets and snuffled his palm for more. Musharraf laughed and stood. "No more for you. Not right now." He opened his DNA kit, pulled out a sampler needle and stuck the dog. The sampler's chamber filled with blood.

Lisa watched. "You talk to it?"

Musharraf shrugged. "It's a habit."

"But it's not sentient."

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"Well, no, but it likes to hear voices." The chamber finished filling. He withdrew the needle, disconnected the collection chamber and fitted it into the kit. The analysis software blinked alive and the blood disappeared into the heart of the kit with a soft vacuum hiss.

"How do you know?"

Musharraf shrugged. "It's a dog. Dogs are that way."

We all frowned. Musharraf started running tests on the blood, humming tunelessly to himself as he worked. His DNA kit peeped and squawked. Lisa watched him run his tests, clearly pissed off that SesCo had sent out a lab rat to retest what she had already done. It was easy to understand her irritation. A centaur could have run those DNA tests.

"I'm astounded that you found a dog in your pits," Musharraf muttered.

Lisa said, "We were going to slag it, but Bunbaum wouldn't let us."

Musharraf eyed her. "How restrained of you."

Lisa shrugged. "Orders."

"Still, I'm sure your thermal surge weapon presented a powerful temptation. How good of you not to slag a starving animal."

Lisa frowned suspiciously. I started to worry that she might take Musharraf apart. She was crazy enough without people talking down to her. The memory addendums on the back of his head were an awfully tempting target: one slap, down goes the lab rat. I wondered if we sank him in a catchment lake if anyone would notice him missing. A biologist, for Christ's sake.

Musharraf turned back to his DNA kit, apparently unaware of his hazard. "Did you know that in the past, people believed that we should have compassion for all things on Earth? Not just for ourselves, but for all living things?"

"So?"

"I would hope you will have compassion for one foolish scientist and not dismember me today."

Lisa laughed. I relaxed. Encouraged, Musharraf said, "It truly is remarkable that you found such a specimen amongst your mining operations. I haven't heard of a living specimen in ten or fifteen years."

"I saw one in a zoo, once," Jaak said.

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"Yes, well, a zoo is the only place for them. And laboratories, of course. They still provide useful genetic data." He was studying the results of the tests, nodding to himself as information scrolled across the kit's screen.

Jaak grinned. "Who needs animals if you can eat stone?"

Musharraf began packing up his DNA kit. "Weeviltech. Precisely. We transcended the animal kingdom." He latched his kit closed and nodded to us all. "Well, it's been quite enlightening. Thank you for letting me see your specimen."

"You're not going to take it with you?"

Musharraf paused, surprised. "Oh no. I don't think so."

"It's not a dog, then?"

"Oh no, it's quite certainly a real dog. But what on Earth would I do with it?" He held up a vial of blood. "We have the DNA. A live one is hardly worth keeping around. Very expensive to maintain, you know. Manufacturing a basic organism's food is quite complex. Clean rooms, air filters, special lights. Recreating the web of life isn't easy. Far more simple to release oneself from it completely than to attempt to recreate it." He glanced at the dog. "Unfortunately, our furry friend over there would never survive weeviltech. The worms would eat him as quickly as they eat everything else. No, you would have to manufacture the animal from scratch. And really, what would be the point of that? A bio-job without hands?" He laughed and headed for his HEV.

We all looked at each other. I jogged after the doctor and caught up with him at the hatch to the tarmac. He had paused on the verge of opening it. "Your centaurs know me now?" he asked.

"Yeah, you're fine."

"Good." He dilated the hatch and strode out into the cold.

I trailed after him. "Wait! What are we supposed to do with it?"

"The dog?" The doctor climbed into the HEV and began strapping in. Wind whipped around us, carrying stinging grit from the tailings piles. "Turn it back to your pits. Or you could eat it, I suppose. I understand that it was a real delicacy. There are recipes for cooking animals. They take time, but they can give quite extraordinary results."

Musharraf's pilot started cycling up his turbofans.

"Are you kidding?"

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Musharraf shrugged and shouted over the increasing scream of the engines. "You should try it! Just another part of our heritage that's atrophied since weeviltech!"

He yanked down the flight cocoon's door, sealing himself inside. The turbofans cycled higher and the pilot motioned me back from their wash as the HEV slowly lifted into the air.

LISA AND JAAK couldn't agree on what we should do with the dog. We had protocols for working out conflict. As a tribe of killers, we needed them. Normally, consensus worked for us, but every once in a while, we just got tangled up and stuck to our positions, and after that, not much could get done without someone getting slaughtered. Lisa and Jaak dug in, and after a couple days of wrangling, with Lisa threatening to cook the thing in the middle of the night while Jaak wasn't watching, and Jaak threatening to cook her if she did, we finally went with a majority vote. I got to be the tie-breaker.

"I say we eat it," Lisa said.

We were sitting in the monitoring room, watching satellite shots of the tailings mountains and the infrared blobs of the mining bots while they ripped around in the earth. In one corner, the object of our discussion lay in its cage, dragged there by Jaak in an attempt to sway the result. He spun his observation chair, turning his attention away from the theater maps. "I think we should keep it. It's cool. Old-timey, you know? I mean, who the hell do you know who has a real dog?"

"Who the hell wants the hassle?" Lisa responded. "I say we try real meat." She cut a line in her forearm with her razors. She ran her finger along the resulting blood beads and tasted them as the wound sealed.

They both looked at me. I looked at the ceiling. "Are you sure you can't decide this without me?"

Lisa grinned. "Come on, Chen, you decide. It was a group find. Jaak won't pout, will you?"

Jaak gave her a dirty look.

I looked at Jaak. "I don't want its food costs to come out of group bonuses. We agreed we'd use part of it for the new Immersive Response. I'm sick of the old one."

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Jaak shrugged. "Fine with me. I can pay for it out of my own. I just won't get any more tats."

I leaned back in my chair, surprised, then looked at Lisa. "Well, if Jaak wants to pay for it, I think we should keep it."

Lisa stared at me, incredulous. "But we could cook it!"

I glanced at the dog where it lay panting in its cage. "It's like having a zoo of our own. I kind of like it."

Musharraf and the Pau Foundation hooked us up with a supply of food pellets for the dog and Jaak looked up an old database on how to splint its busted bones. He bought water filtration so that it could drink.

I thought I'd made a good decision, putting the costs on Jaak, but I didn't really foresee the complications that came with having an unmodified organism in the bunker. The thing shit all over the floor, and sometimes it wouldn't eat, and it would get sick for no reason, and it was slow to heal so we all ended up playing nursemaid to the thing while it lay in its cage. I kept expecting Lisa to break its neck in the middle of the night, but even though she grumbled, she didn't assassinate it.

Jaak tried to act like Musharraf. He talked to the dog. He logged onto the libraries and read all about old-time dogs. How they ran in packs. How people used to breed them.

We tried to figure out what kind of dog it was, but we couldn't narrow it down much, and then Jaak discovered that all the dogs could interbreed, so all you could do was guess that it was some kind of big sheep dog, with maybe a head from a Rottweiler, along with maybe some other kind of dog, like a wolf or coyote or something.

Jaak thought it had coyote in it because they were supposed to have been big adapters, and whatever our dog was, it must have been a big adapter to hang out in the tailings pits. It didn't have the boosters we had, and it had still lived in the rock acids. Even Lisa was impressed by that.

I was carpet bombing Antarctic Recessionists, swooping low, driving the suckers further and further along the ice floe. If I got lucky, I'd drive the whole village out onto a vestigial shelf and sink them all before they knew what was happening. I dove again, strafing and then spinning away from their return slag.

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It was fun, but mostly just a way to kill time between real bombing runs. The new IR was supposed to be as good as the arcades, full immersion and feedback, and portable to boot. People got so lost they had to take intravenous feedings or they withered away while they were inside.

I was about to sink a whole load of refugees when Jaak shouted. "Get out here! You've got to see this!"

I stripped off my goggles and ran for the monitoring room, adrenaline amping up. When I got there, Jaak was just standing in the center of the room with the dog, grinning.

Lisa came tearing in a second later. "What? What is it?" Her eyes scanned the theater maps, ready for bloodshed.

Jaak grinned. "Look at this." He turned to the dog and held out his hand. "Shake."

The dog sat back on its haunches and gravely offered him its paw. Jaak grinned and shook the paw, then tossed it a food pellet. He turned to us and bowed.

Lisa frowned. "Do it again."

Jaak shrugged and went through the performance a second time.

"It thinks?" she asked.

Jaak shrugged. "Got me. You can get it to do things. The libraries are full of stuff on them. They're trainable. Not like a centaur or anything, but you can make them do little tricks, and if they're certain breeds, they can learn special stuff, too."

"Like what?"

"Some of them were trained to attack. Or to find explosives."

Lisa looked impressed. "Like nukes and stuff?"

Jaak shrugged. "I guess."

"Can I try?" I asked.

Jaak nodded. "Go for it."

I went over to the dog and stuck out my hand. "Shake."

It stuck out its paw. My hackles went up. It was like sending signals to aliens. I mean, you expect a bio-job or a robot to do what you want it to. Centaur, go get blown up. Find the op-force. Call reinforcements. The HEV was like that, too. It would do anything. But it was designed.

"Feed it," Jaak said, handing me a food pellet. "You have to feed it when it does it right."

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I held out the food pellet. The dog's long pink tongue swabbed my palm.

I held out my hand again. "Shake." I said. It held out its paw. We shook hands. Its amber eyes stared up at me, solemn.

"That's some weird shit," Lisa said. I shivered, nodding and backed away. The dog watched me go.

That night in my bunk, I lay awake, reading. I'd turned out the lights and only the book's surface glowed, illuminating the bunkroom in a soft green aura. Some of Lisa's art buys glimmered dimly from the walls: a bronze hanging of a phoenix breaking into flight, stylized flames glowing around it; a Japanese woodblock print of Mount Fuji and another of a village weighed down under thick snows; a photo of the three of us in Siberia after the Peninsula campaign, grinning and alive amongst the slag.

Lisa came into the room. Her razors glinted in my book's dim light, flashes of green sparks that outlined her limbs as she moved.

"What are you reading?" She stripped and squeezed into bed with me.

I held up the book and read out loud.

Cut me I won't bleed. Gas me I won't breathe.
Stab me, shoot me, slash me, smash me
I have swallowed science
I am God.
Alone.

I closed the book and its glow died. In the darkness, Lisa rustled under the covers.

My eyes adjusted. She was staring at me. "'Dead Man,' right?"

"Because of the dog," I said.

"Dark reading." She touched my shoulder, her hand warm, the blades embedded, biting lightly into my skin.

"We used to be like that dog," I said.

"Pathetic."

"Scary."

We were quiet for a little while. Finally I asked, "Do you ever wonder what would happen to us if we didn't have our science? If we didn't have our big brains and our weeviltech and our cellstims and — "

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"And everything that makes our life good?" She laughed. "No." She rubbed my stomach. "I like all those little worms that live in your belly." She started to tickle me.

Wormy, squirmy in your belly,
wormy squirmy feeds you Nelly.
Microweevils eat the bad,
and give you something good instead.

I fought her off, laughing. "That's no Yearly."

"Third Grade. Basic bio-logic. Mrs. Alvarez. She was really big on weeviltech."

She tried to tickle me again but I fought her off. "Yeah, well Yearly only wrote about immortality. He wouldn't take it."

Lisa gave up on the tickling and flopped down beside me again. "Blah, blah, blah. He wouldn't take any gene modifications. No c-cell inhibitors. He was dying of cancer and he wouldn't take the drugs that would have saved him. Our last mortal poet. Cry me a river. So what?"

"You ever think about why he wouldn't?"

"Yeah. He wanted to be famous. Suicide's good for attention."

"Seriously, though. He thought being human meant having animals. The whole web of life thing. I've been reading about him. It's weird shit. He didn't want to live without them."

"Mrs. Alvarez hated him. She had some rhymes about him, too. Anyway, what were we supposed to do? Work out weeviltech and DNA patches for every stupid species? Do you know what that would have cost?" She nuzzled close to me. "If you want animals around you, go to a zoo. Or get some building blocks and make something, if it makes you happy. Something with hands, for god's sake, not like that dog." She stared at the underside of the bunk above. "I'd cook that dog in a second."

I shook my head. "I don't know. That dog's different from a bio-job. It looks at us, and there's something there, and it's not us. I mean, take any bio-job out there, and it's basically us, poured into another shape, but not that dog...." I trailed off, thinking.

Lisa laughed. "It shook hands with you, Chen. You don't worry about a centaur when it salutes." She climbed on top of me. "Forget the dog.

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Concentrate on something that matters." Her smile and her razor blades glinted in the dimness.

I woke up to something licking my face. At first I thought it was Lisa, but she'd climbed into her own bunk. I opened my eyes and found the dog.

It was a funny thing to have this animal licking me, like it wanted to talk, or say hello or something. It licked me again, and I thought that it had come a long way from when it had tried to take off Jaak's arm. It put its paws up on my bed, and then in a single heavy movement, it was up on the bunk with me, its bulk curled against me.

It slept there all night. It was weird having something other than Lisa lying next to me, but it was warm and there was something friendly about it. I couldn't help smiling as I drifted back to sleep.

WE FLEW TO HAWAII for a swimming vacation and we brought the dog with us. It was good to get out of the northern cold and into the gentle Pacific. Good to stand on the beach, and look out to a limitless horizon. Good to walk along the beach holding hands while black waves crashed on the sand.

Lisa was a good swimmer. She flashed through the ocean's metallic sheen like an eel out of history and when she surfaced, her naked body glistened with hundreds of iridescent petroleum jewels.

When the Sun started to set, Jaak lit the ocean on fire with his 101. We all sat and watched as the Sun's great red ball sank through veils of smoke, its light shading deeper crimson with every minute. Waves rushed flaming onto the beach. Jaak got out his harmonica and played while Lisa and I made love on the sand.

We'd intended to amputate her for the weekend, to let her try what she had done to me the vacation before. It was a new thing in L.A., an experiment in vulnerability.

She was beautiful, lying there on the beach, slick and excited with all of our play in the water. I licked oil opals off her skin as I sliced off her limbs, leaving her more dependent than a baby. Jaak played his harmonica and watched the Sun set, and watched as I rendered Lisa down to her core.

After our sex, we lay on the sand. The last of the Sun was dropping

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below the water. Its rays glinted redly across the smoldering waves. The sky, thick with particulates and smoke, shaded darker.

Lisa sighed contentedly. "We should vacation here more often."

I tugged on a length of barbed-wire buried in the sand. It tore free and I wrapped it around my upper arm, a tight band that bit into my skin. I showed it to Lisa. "I used to do this all the time when I was a kid." I smiled. "I thought I was so bad-ass."

Lisa smiled. "You are."

"Thanks to science." I glanced over at the dog. It was lying on the sand a short distance away. It seemed sullen and unsure in its new environment, torn away from the safety of the acid pits and tailings mountains of its homeland. Jaak sat beside the dog and played. Its ears twitched to the music. He was a good player. The mournful sound of the harmonica carried easily over the beach to where we lay.

Lisa turned her head, trying to see the dog. "Roll me."

I did what she asked. Already, her limbs were regrowing. Small stumps, which would build into larger limbs. By morning, she would be whole, and ravenous. She studied the dog. "This is as close as I'll ever get to it," she said.

"Sorry?"

"It's vulnerable to everything. It can't swim in the ocean. It can't eat anything. We have to fly its food to it. We have to scrub its water. Dead end of an evolutionary chain. Without science, we'd be as vulnerable as it." She looked up at me. "As vulnerable as I am now." She grinned. "This is as close to death as I've ever been. At least, not in combat."

"Wild, isn't it?"

"For a day. I liked it better when I did it to you. I'm already starving."

I fed her a handful of oily sand and watched the dog, standing uncertainly on the beach, sniffing suspiciously at some rusting scrap iron that stuck out of the beach like a giant memory fin. It pawed up a chunk of red plastic rubbed shiny by the ocean and chewed on it briefly, before dropping it. It started licking around its mouth. I wondered if it had poisoned itself again.

"It sure can make you think," I muttered. I fed Lisa another handful of sand. "If someone came from the past, to meet us here and now, what do you think they'd say about us? Would they even call us human?"

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Lisa looked at me seriously. "No, they'd call us gods."

Jaak got up and wandered into the surf, standing knee-deep in the black smoldering waters. The dog, driven by some unknown instinct, followed him, gingerly picking its way across the sand and rubble.

The dog got tangled in a cluster of wire our last day on the beach. Really ripped the hell out of it: slashes through its fur, broken legs, practically strangled. It had gnawed one of its own paws half off trying to get free. By the time we found it, it was a bloody mess of ragged fur and exposed meat.

Lisa stared down at the dog. "Christ, Jaak, you were supposed to be watching it."

"I went swimming. You can't keep an eye on the thing all the time."

"It's going to take forever to fix this," she fumed.

"We should warm up the hunter," I said. "It'll be easier to work on it back home." Lisa and I knelt down to start cutting the dog free. It whimpered and its tail wagged feebly as we started to work.

Jaak was silent.

Lisa slapped him on his leg. "Come on, Jaak, get down here. It'll bleed out if you don't hurry up. You know how fragile it is."

Jaak said, "I think we should eat it."

Lisa glanced up, surprised. "You do?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

I looked up from where I was tearing away tangled wires from around the dog's torso. "I thought you wanted it to be your pet. Like in the zoo."

Jaak shook his head. "Those food pellets are expensive. I'm spending half my salary on food and water filtration, and now this bullshit." He waved his hand at the tangled dog. "You have to watch the sucker all the time. It's not worth it."

"But still, it's your friend. It shook hands with you."

Jaak laughed. "You're my friend." He looked down at the dog, his face wrinkled with thought. "It's, it's...an animal."

Even though we had all idly discussed what it would be like to eat the dog, it was a surprise to hear him so determined to kill it. "Maybe you should sleep on it." I said. "We can get it back to the bunker, fix it up, and then you can decide when you aren't so pissed off about it."

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"No." He pulled out his harmonica and played a few notes, a quick jazzy scale. He took the harmonica out of his mouth. "If you want to put up the money for his feed, I'll keep it, I guess, but otherwise...." He shrugged.

"I don't think you should cook it."

"You don't?" Lisa glanced at me. "We could roast it, right here, on the beach."

I looked down at the dog, a mass of panting, trusting animal. "I still don't think we should do it."

Jaak looked at me seriously. "You want to pay for the feed?"

I sighed. "I'm saving for the new Immersive Response."

"Yeah, well, I've got things I want to buy too, you know." He flexed his muscles, showing off his tattoos. "I mean, what the fuck good does it do?"

"It makes you smile."

"Immersive Response makes you smile. And you don't have to clean up after its crap. Come on, Chen. Admit it. You don't want to take care of it either. It's a pain in the ass."

We all looked at each other, then down at the dog.

Lisa roasted the dog on a spit, over burning plastics and petroleum skimmed from the ocean. It tasted okay, but in the end it was hard to understand the big deal. I've eaten slagged centaur that tasted better.

Afterward, we walked along the shoreline. Opalescent waves crashed and roared up the sand, leaving jewel slicks as they receded and the Sun sank red in the distance.

Without the dog, we could really enjoy the beach. We didn't have to worry about whether it was going to step in acid, or tangle in barb-wire half-buried in the sand, or eat something that would keep it up vomiting half the night.

Still, I remember when the dog licked my face and hauled its shaggy bulk onto my bed, and I remember its warm breathing beside me, and sometimes, I miss it.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Boys Are Back in Town, by Christopher Golden, Bantam, 2004, $12.

CHRISTOPHER Golden is the master of the slow creep — the kind of story that sneaks out of the everyday, so quietly that you don't realize anything is really amiss until the world seems to shift and the ground gets all spongy underfoot.

Because of this, his books sometimes seem to start with more detail concerning the background of his characters than you might feel you need to know. Who they are, where they come from. Their day-to-day life. Their hopes and dreams. But for the reader who stays with the story — and this isn't particularly hard, because Golden has a wonderfully smooth prose style — the payoff is immense. And intense.

The Boys Are Back in Town is no exception on both counts: slow start, big payoff.

It starts with an ordinary morning for Will James, a reporter for a Boston paper. He gets passed over for a promotion he was really counting on, but what makes it sting is that the woman getting the job isn't as qualified as he is. But she's a team player and doesn't have his need to debunk occult practitioners, who James feels are robbing decent people of their life savings. The Lifestyles section of the paper needs a broader focus than James can give it.

So far, it's only the kind of disappointment that everyone gets in their lives. But then James gets convinced by some of his high school friends to attend their upcoming reunion. He sends an e-mail to Mike Lebo, another friend of theirs, telling him that he's changed his mind and he's going to the reunion after all. The e-mail gets rejected because the username is unknown.

Still not too strange. Except the next night at the reunion, when

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he mentions to one of his friends that he wonders where Mike is, he's told curtly that he isn't being funny and is given the cold shoulder.

It turns out that Mike Lebo died in high school. That can't be. James has had an ongoing relationship with him since graduation, visiting once in a while, exchanging e-mails on a regular basis. But as soon as he's told about the death, it seems as though he has two sets of memories. In one Mike Lebo is the victim of a hit-and-run death; in the other, he's still James's living, breathing friend.

The former, unfortunately, proves to be the truth.

It's also not the last bit of confusion James has with his memories, and he soon realizes that either he's going crazy, or somehow, somebody is changing the past.

I don't want to tell you any more, because if you do try this book, you deserve to have all the mysteries and puzzles unfold for you in the natural course of the story. But I can tell you that it's an eerie, fascinating tale in which discrepancies between what actually happened and what James remembers pile up until you're sure there's no way Golden can bring the story home in a satisfying manner.

But bring it home he does, with style and heart, and a cast of characters that you can't help but like, even while you find yourself suspecting each one at some point or another during the narrative.

The Sandman: Endless Nights, by Neil Gaiman & diverse artistic hands, DC/Vertigo, 2003, $24.95.

Has it really been seven years since Gaiman finished off his lengthy Sandman saga? Though I suppose, once you start counting up the projects in between — which include fascinating books such as *Neverwhere*, *American Gods*, and *Coraline* — you start to wonder where he found the time to write the seven stories collected here.

Because they aren't light, throwaway stories.

A quick recap for the uninitiated: years ago, Gaiman scripted an ongoing series for DC Comics about seven siblings he called the Endless (all the issues of which have been collected in trade paperback format and are currently in print). They're not gods, but they're most certainly not human either, though they do occasionally fall prey to human foibles. What they are is the physical representation of the names by which they're known: Dream,

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Death, Desire, Delirium, Despair, Destruction, and Destiny.

For this return to their world, Gaiman has written a story for each of the siblings, each illustrated by a different artist. The talent Gaiman has gathered to help him tell these stories is staggering: you need only flip through the pages to be seduced by their artistic vision. Some tell a story in the traditional panel-following-panel method, others explore different approaches to illustrated narrative. Their only similarity is that they are giants in terms of their talent.

But unlike some comic books where the art overshadows the story (much like contemporary film where too often the FX does the same), Gaiman reminds us once again of just how accomplished he is in this field. Each of the Endless get their fair share of time on stage — even if often the story ebbs and flows around their presence — but longtime fans will probably appreciate "The Heart of a Star" the most. This is where Gaiman has the audacity to strip away all the mysteries of his long-running series and give us the truth behind its mythology. Though curiously, in doing so, he has only increased the power of those same mysteries.

Anyone who has dismissed comic books over the past couple of decades would do well to have a look at this new collection to see just how fascinating a medium it has become. For the rest of us, sit back and enjoy this visit to the dark — though sometimes whimsical — twisting tales brought to us by Gaiman and his collaborators.

One of the most depressing things about a column such as this centers around all the books I *don't* get to review. The ones that get the shortest shrift are collections and anthologies, mostly because I don't read them from cover to cover, but dip into them, a story here, another there, and by the time I'm done, the book in question is gone from the new release shelves and needs to be special ordered.

But I know that readers of this magazine — because you *must* be picking it up for the wonderful stories, not columns such as this — are among that rarity of readers who actually appreciate short fiction and make the effort to seek it out. So here are a few books you might want to look out for the next time you're in a bookstore, or wandering about online:

One Lamp: Alternate History Stories from The Magazine of Fantasy

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Science Fiction, edited by Gordon Van Gelder, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003, $15.95.

The title says it all, but let me add that what makes this so entertaining for a reader such as myself is that the focus *isn't* just on Civil War and World War stories. Sure, there are some, but there are also ones such as "Two Dooms" by Cyril M. Kornbluth that move on the periphery of WWII — it's about events involved in the A-bomb research and a killer of a story — or "The Two Dicks" by Paul McAuley, a fascinating excursion into the mind of sf's favorite paranoid genius. Except are you really paranoid when everyone *is* out to get you?

Already readers of this magazine, you know the quality of the material this collection presents, and it's wonderful having the stories all in one volume to revisit easily.

Trampoline: An Anthology, edited by Kelly Link, Small Beer Press, 2003, $17.

The fact that this anthology gives us a new novella by the incomparable Greer Gilman ("A Crowd of Bone," an exploration of winter myth and narrative experimentation that's linked to her earlier story "Jack Daw's Pack") would be reason enough to pick it up, but it also includes new stories by Karen Joy Fowler, Alex Irvine, Jeffrey Ford, and a host of other perhaps not-so-well-known authors who prove to be just as talented.

There's no thematic thread here except that these are exceptional visions in which the authors aren't afraid to take chances with how they deliver the stories to us. Please note: that doesn't mean that you have to work hard to appreciate them; it just means that there's a lot of meat in these stories, and that sometimes the authors use unexpected narrative techniques.

SF Humor! An alien archeologist finds love among the "runes" in the fabled Greek Isles

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The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Sixteenth Annual Collection, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, St. Martin's Press, 2003, $35 hardcover, $19.95 trade paperback.

It's hard to believe that this series has been running for sixteen years now and remains just as strong as it did when it first debuted. I find this a dangerous anthology to read because it's forever introducing me to writers with whom I was previously unfamiliar, and that, in turn, sends me on far too many expensive treks to the bookstore.

Datlow and Windling specialize on tracking down and finding the kind of material we might otherwise miss: from within our field, from the small press, from the larger literary world beyond. And as in the anthology mentioned above, the thematic thread is simply good stories, of which they deliver plenty.

This is Windling's last year on the book (as she rides off into the sunset to work on her own fiction) so it'll be interesting to see what Datlow's new collaborators, Kelly Link and Gavin Grant, bring to the mix.

Year's Best Fantasy, edited by David Hartwell, Eos, 2003, $7.99.

For those of you who prefer the source of your fantasy short fiction to come from closer to home (or if you're like me, you like both what's considered genre and that which might come from farther afield), Hartwell's ongoing series for Eos is the place to go. Although there are certainly stories with a contemporary setting to be found herein, this is *the* place to come if you like high fantasy, which has always been kind of a rarity when it comes to the short story length.

Anyone who says that short fantasy isn't viable isn't reading the magazines and anthologies that Hartwell is, or this annual collection of his. It's also got one of my favorite short-shorts in it, Ellen Klages's "Travel Agency," which I first read online.

I've barely scratched the surface of the short fiction books that are stacked around my office, but here we already are at the end of the column. Perhaps I'll touch on a few more next time out. Until then, happy reading.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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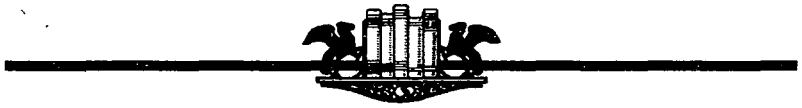

Musing on Books

Michelle West

Burndive, by Karin Lowachee, Warner Aspect, 2003, $6.99.

Monstrous Regiment, by Terry Pratchett, HarperCollins, 2003, $24.95.

Sunshine, by Robin McKinley, Berkley, 2003, $23.95.

IT PROBABLY won't come as a surprise to many of you that I *love* this job. It's kind of like perpetual Christmas, and when this month's books crossed my threshold in their admittedly plain bubble packages, the whole neighborhood could hear my shriek when I opened them. Luckily, my neighbors all have children, so they're used to loud noises. Unfortunately for *me*, the chance to actually read the books came far later than I would have liked, and they were pried from my stiff and resisting fingers by my friends and family while I worked — both at the store and at home — preparing for the Toronto WorldCon. Working at a specialty store with too few staff during a convention I attend as a writer is a bit on the stressful side; it was fun, but it was manic fun.

And, as so often is the case, my galleys came straight afterward. And. Well. So did the requisite crash and burn post-con illness.

You know you're too ill to read when you open up *any* one of the three novels above and can't follow a single sentence from beginning to end.

But the wonder of modern medicine saved me from that continued torture, and what's left was pure pleasure, from start to finish.

Karin Lowachee's first effort, *Warchild*, was nothing short of fabulous. But this is a second novel, and a second novel is its own special nightmare. You see, no one actually cares how long it took the author to write the *first* book — it could have been years in the

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making, or possibly decades. The second novel is different, because *that* one is expected a year later. And many an author, if they're going to misstep, will misstep on book two precisely because of that scheduling.

I'm delighted to say that Lowachee has somehow managed to keep that struggle from affecting the book itself. *Burndive*, on the surface of things, is not as structurally daring as *Warchild*. But in many ways, it's the more subtle book. Ryan Azarcon is the son of Cairo Azarcon, the most notorious captain in the fleet that has successfully fended off the alien strits in their war with EarthHub. He defines the term maverick; he makes what he sees as the most cost effective choices, distant bureaucracy be damned. If you've read *Warchild*, you know him; if you haven't, you meet him in an entirely different way — because Ryan Azarcon is no spaceling, no marine, no soldier. He's the son of the somewhat estranged Songlian Lau, a rich woman with a talent for handling the media, and his life to date has been the life of a stationbound boy, sent to Earth for schooling. He's seen his father a total of three times in his life, and although communications have crossed space at appropriate moments, he doesn't feel he knows the man, and he resents his absence, as all children must.

Ryan is much closer to a contemporary normal person than Jos Musey of *Warchild* was. His life isn't shattered by pirates, his family isn't murdered before his eyes; he wasn't raised by aliens. He's been well off, somewhat spoiled, and certain of food, shelter, and education: in short, he's as close to us as we're likely to see in Lowachee's rich and complicated universe. And he's a young man laboring under post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression, drifting through life. Because his family is so prominent, he has only one friend whom he trusts: his bodyguard, Sid. He had a girlfriend, but she left him after the incident. And the incident — a terrorist attack that he was almost in the middle of — has left scars and a sullen, walled silence that can't be breached.

Lowachee's ability to paint cause and effect gives the violence a very human face; the consequences carry out throughout the book, and they feel real. *This* is what we would face, were we right there. She doesn't dwell on detail; Ryan certainly tries not to. Instead, she dwells in the currents of his emotions, his resentments and his

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fear. So does he — until the moment his life almost ends at the hands of unknown assassins.

It would seem that someone doesn't like the peace talks being held between Azarcon, his admiral, and the alien strit — and they want to make the point to Cairo Azarcon as clearly as possible. Cairo's response? To reenter the life of his son with a vengeance.

There is not so much that obviously surprises here as there was in *Warchild*, because Ryan is not as broken and shattered a person as young Jos Musey was. The aliens, for Ryan, remain alien. But Ryan is, in his fashion, fighting. The terrain over which he fights is more subtle; the weapons he uses simple words, simple conversation, and cold — or furious — silence. But readers of the first book will be happy to see Jos and his jets again, even if they look entirely different through the filter of Ryan Azarcon.

Lowachee does once again use structural viewpoint shifts to great effect. Although most of the book is written in tight third person, the last third is written in first — and it suits the tone and the growth of young Ryan as he slowly comes into his own. This is an excellent addition to an admittedly small canon of work, and I recommend it without reservation. But as a reader, I want *more*. More of the *Macedon*, of the Azarcons, of the jets — more of every aspect of the world. And in a genre of tired sequels, this is high praise indeed.

Monstrous Regiment is, on the surface of things, a Discworld novel. But it has, in tone and texture, much in common with *Small Gods*; it's a darker work for Pratchett. Oh, it's not devoid of his trademark wit, his sly humor, and his affectionate cynicism. But Pratchett is tackling an issue here, and if he does so with his inimitable style, he has a few things to say nonetheless. Borogravia is a kingdom that is constantly at war. It's at war with everyone, and for not a lot of reason. It's a religious kingdom as well, but God seems to have gone a little south in the sanity department, and even the devout are beginning to realize that calling rocks an abomination in the eyes of God is a little on the... difficult side.

So people tend to pray to the Duchess, a Queen Victoria-like character whose picture hangs on every wall in every room in the Kingdom. She's not a particularly pretty woman, and she's not — according to some — particularly alive. But that doesn't really matter

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to the army, and it's to the army that young Polly is determined to go. Religious issues make women who wear men's clothing an abomination — and women aren't *allowed* to be soldiers...but Polly's beloved brother, her slow, dim painter of birds, was swallowed by the army, and marched off never to return. She wants him back, and short of joining, what other option is there? So she cuts her long, fine hair, shunting aside petticoats and aprons for a feminine view of male swagger, belching and farting as she swears an oath to fight and die for the Duchess.

She ends up in a unit led by Sergeant Jackrum and Corporal Strappi, the latter a mean bully with a penchant for self-righteousness that makes him one of the few people Pratchett treats without any fondness at all. But she *also* ends up with a troll, a vampire, a religious loon, a pyromaniac, and a psychotic for comrades. And on her way toward the worst of the fighting, she learns about the value of a properly placed sock, an overly idealistic officer, and her own resourcefulness.

Which would be par for the course in a Pratchett novel — but there are dark edges to this one. He doesn't really turn away from the atrocities of war, and there is a particular section that is devoid of humor in every possible way. I won't spoil it. I also won't spoil much by saying that Polly isn't the only person who's come to the army for a reason — but even here, Pratchett's minimal attention to the hopeless lives of women who live in a man's society is pointed, spot on, and again, without humor.

Having said all that, I loved this book. I am one of the few readers for whom *Small Gods* did not work, because I felt the lack of things Discworldian — in particular Death — to be almost too heavy-handed. And yet, for me, it works here. Possibly because religion didn't inform or deform my early life in the same way as gender issues did. Possibly because I have a known weakness for books that deal with gender issues — and make no mistake, *Monstrous Regiment* does that. But it does it well, and with honesty; Pratchett is no one's apologist, and no one's drum beater. If you aren't a Pratchett reader, but you do read genre gender books, this one is more than worth your time; if you are a Pratchett reader, don't wait another second.

The McKinley book came with the flag "erotic," a word that often sets off alarm bells for me. Why?

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Because so little that is tagged as erotic *is* erotic. But I shouldn't have worried; erotic, in this particular case, is marketing speak for vampires. And yes, there are vampires in *Sunshine*. In fact, there are other odd creatures as well — McKinley seems to have stepped into Laurell Hamilton territory with her newest novel. But on completion, the book feels like it's been blended with some subtle air of a de Lint novel instead.

At the outset, *Sunshine* seems to be set in contemporary America, in a small town. And Sunshine, birthname Rae, is a baker at Charlie's Coffeehouse, a popular café that serves, among other things, the cinnamon buns for which Sunshine is famed. Sunshine's father, Onyx Blaise, disappeared when she was young, in the war that vampires started. Sunshine's mother married Charlie, and her daughter, who loves to feed people, drifted into the kitchen, and worked there as if it were natural. She met Mel, her boyfriend, made friends with the Special Ops who deal with vampires, among other things, and made a life for herself — a life that has paled with time. Restless, desiring isolation, Sunshine retreats to the lake

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at which she spent so much time in her childhood.

And this turns out to be a bad choice, because there are vampires at the lake, and no one survives vampires. But Sunshine is part of a game between two vampires, and instead of dying instantly — and horribly — she's left shackled as food in a cabin with one other occupant: a vampire named Con.

This vampire is different, as Sunshine herself is different. He does his best not to devour her, and in turn, against any sane sense of self-preservation, she saves his life, helping him out and into the sunlight that should be his instant death — but isn't.

Sunshine's heritage is magical in nature — and she comes from an old, old family, the Blaises. She proves herself to be part Blaise, even if she doesn't know what that means, and her rescue of Con propels her into a world that she was certain existed — but only for *other* people.

From there on in, things get stranger, and the solid grounding of reality that makes Sunshine — both the novel and the protagonist — so appealing, gives way to the fantastic. The vampires live forever, and they have a lot of money; they want to own the world, and while they don't mind cattle, they'd prefer if their food didn't kick up a fuss and kill them. Things are *bad*, much worse than the insular Sunshine even dreamed of; there might be a century left before vampires control the world.

Is this a departure for McKinley? Yes. But McKinley's readers will still find much to love in the book; her trademark graceful prose, her quiet insight into outsiders, her love of growing things, of domesticity. These form an anchor for Sunshine that grounds the book in a solid emotional reality that never gets lost.

My only complaint is that there is so much that's started in the novel that is left unfinished and unexplored by its end — and I'm hoping that McKinley has at least another book — or more — that follows Sunshine's passage into the dark, and beyond it.

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Convention-goers know one New Orleans (primarily the French Quarter) and natives know another — or several others. Whose do you favor? Anne Rice's? James Sallis's? John Kennedy Toole's? Poppy Z. Brite's? George Alec Effinger's? Or Miss Margery's?

Albert Cowdrey reports from his home in the Crescent City that his stories "Crux," "Mosh," and "Ransom" will soon be collected and expanded into novel form. He also promises more stories soon.

Rapper

By Albert E. Cowdrey

MISS MARGERY *TRIED* TO talk to 2Bad. But he just wasn't listening.

The day after an armed robber hit the St. Claude Super-Mini Market, she cornered him in a rubbish-strewn alleyway where he was smoking a joint. Miss Margery stood four-ten in her old Nikes while 2Bad towered six-oh in his designer models. But she faced up to him anyway, and gave him fair warning.

"You think there ain't no justice in this world," she said. "Just wait. The whole Ninth Ward is sick of you. I have seen your fate in a dream. First you gonna die, and then you gonna come back in the body of a beast."

2Bad, whose real name was Arthur, had spent years listening to people predict that God or somebody would fix him. But this threat was a new one.

"You some crazy, lady," he said, exhaling a slow ribbon of acrid smoke while playing in his pants pocket with the roll of bills he'd extracted from Vijay Pandit, proprietor of the Super-Mini.

Actually, 2Bad was a child of the middle class — his mother, Lily

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Potter, a friend of Miss Margery, taught Civics and Driver Ed at Carver High School — but he worshipped Eminem and longed for wealth and fame as the Ninth Ward's first white gangsta rapper. Until that time he was living by the crime he liked to chant about.

Miss Margery viewed with disapproval the waist of his pants, which was roughly at crotch level, and the crotch of his pants, which was about at knee level. The underpants he flaunted were purple with a design of little gold fleurs-de-lis, the symbol of the New Orleans Saints. 2Bad didn't follow the Saints: his shorts were just what he'd happened to shoplift one day when dragging through Macy's.

He also wore a turquoise nose plug and six silver earrings lined up along the edge of each pale pink ear. That impressed a lot of people, but not Miss Margery.

"At least," she said, "when you walking on all fours, and wearing some mangy old fur, you will be better dressed than you are now" — a cutting remark, for 2Bad considered himself a fashion plate.

Sighing over the world's evil, but satisfied that she had done her duty, Miss Margery turned off St. Claude Avenue into Mother Cabrini Street, lugging a fresh supply of root beer and Twinkies in her old Tupperware tote.

In most ways her neighborhood hadn't changed since she was a girl; fences still sagged and sunflowers still nodded in tiny yards; shotgun cottages, neat or ruinous, still baked in the semitropical Sun. Every crack in the street was familiar to her, perhaps because it had last been blacktopped in 1973.

The only thing really new was the piston-driven chant of rap pouring from open windows, and Miss Margery didn't consider that an improvement on the gospel tunes she'd learned as a girl, around the corner at the Fire-Baptized Church of God in Christ.

In her own neat double-shotgun cottage a block from the Mississippi levee, with the sign out front that said READER & ADVISOR/YOUR FUTURE REVEALED/MONEY LOVE & LIFE ETERNAL, Miss Margery put away her supplies and poured herself a mug of root beer.

She watched a few minutes of her favorite soap on TV, then spent an hour in the windowed side hall watering and talking to her African violets. With the approach of noon, she got busy in her kitchen, making tea and

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laying out Twinkies on her best plates with the little blue Chinamen on them. A group of her ladies were coming for Tarot and cookies at one, and she needed to be ready for them.

By now she'd put 2Bad out of her mind: that was the thing about doing your duty — once you did it, you didn't have to think about it anymore. She ought to have remembered that sometimes it was in the nature of evil to remind you.

Chinese Chick-N-Ribs, a few doors down from the Super-Mini, was next to be victimized.

This time the technique was entirely different. The proprietor of Chick-N-Ribs, Mr. Wang, had grown up in the slums of Macao and knew the tricks of his trade. It was no secret in the neighborhood that a ten-gauge shotgun was mounted underneath his counter with a cord tied to the trigger. The other end of the cord spent the day looped around Mr. Wang's wrist as he sat at his cash register, inside a bulletproof Plexiglas cage.

Nor could he be ambushed: every night at ten when he closed, he was chauffeured to his mansion across the river by a policeman, Sgt. Oscar W. Buster, who weighed 220 and had six notches in the handle of his personal Glock. So Chick-N-Ribs was burgled rather than robbed, and the only thing the thief was able to steal was a quantity of ribs quietly marinating in pans of Mr. Wang's Famous Special Sauce.

Despite the change of MO, Miss Margery knew infallibly who was guilty. Next morning she found 2Bad lounging on his mama's stoop, with grease all over his face, drinking a Slurpee.

"This is your last warning," she told him grimly. "I have heard your death rattle and you are too young to die. You better change your ways while you got a chance. You gonna wind up in the body of a beast."

"Fuck you, bitch," muttered 2Bad. He was suffering from a king-sized stomach ache caused by too many ribs, as well as a dry throat from swallowing controlled substances.

Miss Margery shook her head over the bad language and proceeded on her errands of the day. At the Super-Mini she bought a box of Constant Comment tea bags and two rolls of paper towels. After paying she lingered in the little store, wandering up one aisle and down another. Mr. Pandit

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liked to set the control on his big throbbing air conditioner at Hang Meat, and she wanted to chill down before venturing into the heat again.

While idling among the tortilla chips, she noticed two unwinking roan eyes gazing at her through a small window set in the storeroom door. She pushed it open and discovered that the eyes belonged to Sergeant Buster. Seated comfortably on a pile of crates with a Walkman plugged into his left ear, he was keeping cool while listening to a rapper chant his new hit, "Kill U Mutha."

Buster looked down at the diminutive lady with the Tupperware tote and frowned. Miss Margery retreated, letting the door whisper shut behind her. At the checkout she asked Mr. Pandit about his new guard. He explained that Buster had been suspended with pay by the New Orleans Police Department, pending an investigation into the deaths of two gang members.

Miss Margery nodded. She knew that Buster liked being on suspension because then he could double dip, drawing his official salary and at the same time earning money as a security guard that everybody wanted to hire because he was more or less licensed to kill.

"Until I close he is here," said Mr. Pandit, "and then he drives Mr. Wang to his home across the river. The officer is a nice man, very busy, very hard-working."

"I don't know," said Miss Margery cautiously, "that I would exactly call him *nice*."

Back home, she poured root beer over a tall tumbler full of ice cubes and analyzed the developing situation.

Though Miss Margery had been raised a Christian, her dreams and visions long ago had forced her to admit the truth of reincarnation. For instance: Oscar Buster. She'd known the cop ever since he was a small, vicious child. In her dreams he sometimes showed up in the form of a strange animal, not to be found even among the exotic creatures in the Audubon Zoo. Then one night Miss Margery caught *Jurassic Park* on TV and suddenly realized that in a long-ago existence Buster had been a velociraptor.

And there was her friend, Lily Potter. Lily appeared in her dreams as a nervous, washed-out blonde, dressed in old-fashioned clothes and gabbling in a foreign tongue as she scrubbed pots and mopped floors and did other hard domestic labor. It was not until she saw a program on the History Channel that Miss Margery realized that Lily had once been

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Hitler's mother. Having deplorable sons was her fate.

That seemed so sad that Miss Margery stopped sipping her drink long enough to mutter a brief prayer that 2Bad would repent, if only for his mama's sake. But she feared — accurately, as matters turned out — that it was already too late.

Sure enough, just before closing time that night 2Bad burst into the Super-Mini wearing a stocking mask and waving a Saturday-night special. What had worked once, he thought, would probably work again. But things had changed.

Mr. Pandit ducked down behind the counter and Oscar Buster emerged from the storeroom holding his Glock with both hands at arm's length and roaring, "*FREEZE, mo'fucker!!*"

Wishing suddenly that he had stayed plain old Arthur Potter, 2Bad dropped his little shiny .25 and turned to run. His vision was obscured by his mask, but the real problem was his pants. The waist slipped to knee level and he slammed into the concrete floor. Buster stood over him and nudged him with his foot until 2Bad rolled over, and then — knowing from past experience that it was always better to have the entry wound in front — blasted a gaping hole through the center of his narrow chest.

When Mr. Pandit emerged from under the counter, Buster said in flat official tones, "The subject pointed a gun at me despite my warning, and I had to fire in self-defense."

"Absolutely, absolutely," said Mr. Pandit, shaking his head over the shattered remains of 2Bad. "I saw it all and I will confirm everything you say."

Buster blew on the muzzle of his Glock, making a small hollow sound, and nodded with satisfaction. Another notch. Another investigation. Another brief suspension with pay. Another chance to double dip.

Business, he reflected, is business.

After 2Bad's funeral, Miss Margery took Lily Potter back to her house to comfort her. Giving her Kleenex for her eyes, and a cup of tea to calm her nerves, Miss Margery patted her shoulder and said, "Just you remember, Honey: death is not the end."

The remark was worthy of the Delphic Oracle, for it could be taken in two opposite ways, comforting or threatening. As Miss Margery hoped, Lily took it as comforting.

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"I know people say he was bad," she sobbed, "but he was just my little Arthur to me."

For an instant Miss Margery heard the words as "my little Adolf" and felt a kind of electric shock. Then she shook her head to clear it, and got back to comforting.

Lily wanted to arrange a seance. But Miss Margery knew that her friend would grieve even more if she found out where little Arthur was now, so she said evasively, "We'll talk about it later, Sweetheart. Right now you are just too shook up to be talking with spirits."

That night in a dream Miss Margery saw a small humpbacked beast crouching between two broken flowerpots, gnashing its sharp little teeth and staring at her with garnet eyes. She had never read Freud, but she knew without being told that a dream is a rebus, where words turn to images. The animal was 2Bad Potter, and she pictured him living in some place like the Honey Island Swamp, where he belonged.

In this, however, she was wrong. The dream was even more precise than she realized.

Later that week, Miss Margery — though she hated to travel — was obliged to trek all the way to the Seventh Ward, out by the Fairgrounds Race Track. Her brother Daryle had lost a big toe to the ravages of the sugar diabetes, and her sister-in-law needed help nursing him. Miss Margery watered her African violets well before leaving, addressing them all as Darlin' and assuring them she would be back soon.

After three days she returned to find the whole room stinking and devastated and the rest of the house spared similar treatment only because Miss Margery had locked the doors into the side hall as a security measure.

Something with small busy hands had opened a catch on a window, then turned over all the pots and smashed them and dragged out dirt and violets on the floor. The vandal had defecated abundantly, rolled in the feces and used its own fur as a kind of paintbrush. The most shocking thing of all was a long smear on the floor that could be seen various ways —

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— but that Miss Margery read as the number 2.

Then she remembered that raccoons infested the *batture*, the wetland outside the Mississippi River levee, only a block from her cottage. Raising her small mahogany hands to heaven, she cried, "Oh, God help me! *He's back!!*"

"But why attack you? You did not kill him," objected Mr. Pandit, when she told him the story.

"You think he gonna mess with Oscar Buster?" she demanded. "Anyway, I foretold his fate, so he thinks I must have caused it, too."

Mr. Pandit nodded understandingly. Growing up in Benares, he had certainly not acquired any prejudice against the doctrines of rebirth and karma, the divine law of cause and effect that directs the soul to its appropriate body.

It seemed perfectly logical to him that 2Bad would reappear as an obnoxious wild creature; indeed, remembering 2Bad, Mr. Pandit decided he hadn't undergone any significant change whatever, except for mere outer form.

"What I like to know is what I can do about him," Miss Margery went on. "Those animals is often rabid, so I've heard. I'm afraid to go out at night for fear he'll jump out from under a bush and bite me."

"I will sell you one thing you need, one very cheap thing," he said, placing a package of marshmallows on the counter. "You must also buy one not-so-cheap thing from Bud Flick's Rod & Gun Shop on Caffin Avenue."

"Bud Flick is a Klansman," she objected.

"So, you must fight fire with fire," said Mr. Pandit, philosophically.

Half an hour later, Miss Margery, carrying the marshmallows in her Tupperware bag, nervously pushed through the steel-plated door of Bud Flick's shop. A moment of profound silence followed as half a dozen large red-faced men, none of whom had a hair on his head that was more than a sixteenth of an inch long, turned to stare at her.

Bud's eyes were cerulean instead of roan, but the expression in them was not unlike Officer Buster's as he said, "Yeah?"

"I need a trap," she told him.

"For what?"

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"Raccoon."

"Under ten pounds or over ten pounds?"

She meditated, trying to estimate the size of the creature she'd seen in her dream. "Over."

"Forty-nine-ninety-five," said Bud, his mind already at work on a little joke utilizing the word "coon." But because Miss Margery was a paying customer, he waited until she left the store to tell it.

She had trouble carrying home the catch-'em-alive trap in its large brown box, and then she wasted nearly an hour trying to figure out how the trigger mechanism worked. In the end, however, she was able to set the trap under a hydrangea bush just beneath the window the beast had entered last time. 2Bad had never been very smart, and she was inclined to believe that when he returned he would try the very same thing he'd done before — just as he had at the Super-Mini.

She piled marshmallows inside the trap behind the trigger, and scattered others loosely in a trail leading up to it. Then she spent the rest of the day cleaning the side hall and repotting her violets. She talked to them constantly, knowing what a trauma the raccoon's attack must have caused them. That night she hated to leave them alone, shut off from the rest of the house, but felt she had no choice in the matter: 2Bad must be lured in order to be captured.

But nothing happened that night, and the rest of the week went by with only ants showing an interest in the marshmallows. There was brief excitement one morning when she spotted something furry in the trap, but it was only a neighbor's cat, considerably irritated, and she had to set it free.

On the seventh morning Miss Margery forgot to check the trap. She had a busy day, for a group of her ladies arrived at ten and another at two for palm readings and gossip over refreshments. It was evening before the second party left, and after seeing them off at her gate, Miss Margery suddenly remembered the trap and checked under the hydrangea.

Inside was the biggest raccoon she'd ever seen. It was chewing at the metal bars and gazing at her with feral rage. She regarded it with loathing and pity.

"Just look where you wound up," she said. "Now, I know you won't never take good advice, but I am conscience-bound to offer it to you

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anyways. Try to live like a good animal; you may be reborn as a politician. Then, little by little you can work your way back to being human."

The creature bared its teeth at her.

How to get rid of it? Raising the handle with a stick, so as not to risk a bite, Miss Margery tried to lift the trap but found it too heavy for her to carry. After a moment's thought she walked up to St. Claude Avenue, entered the Super-Mini, and headed straight to the storeroom.

"Officer," she said, "I been knowing you a long time. Would you do me a favor?"

"Maybe." Buster's voice was a kind of distant rumble, like summer thunder.

"I caught me a raccoon," she explained. "Now, I know you carry Mr. Wang across the river every night. If you take this animal with you and set him loose on the west bank you can keep the trap, which is brand new and cost me forty-nine-ninety-five. I don't have no more use for it."

Buster showed up to inspect the trap just before ten that night. Miss Margery put on her porch light and joined him. At sight of the cop, the raccoon stopped gnawing at the bars and shrank back, trembling piteously.

"So you want him turned loose?" asked Buster.

"Yes, sir. I want him far, far away from me, but all the same I want him to have another chance."

Buster gazed at her curiously, wondering why anybody would give anything another chance. "Sure," he said.

He lifted the trap with two fingers, like an Easter basket, carried it to his growler and put it in the trunk beside a pile of bulletproof vests. To the shivering and shrinking animal, he said, "You mess in this car and I will nail your skin to a tree with you inside it."

Then he strolled to Chinese Chick-N-Ribs, picked up Mr. Wang (who was waiting anxiously, embracing his cash box), drove him across the Mississippi on the Huey P. Long Bridge, and delivered him safe to his home in a gated community called Oak Alley Estates.

On his way back, Buster stopped at an All-Night Mart to buy a roll of twine. Before reaching the on-ramp, he turned onto a narrow side road and parked at the foot of the levee. He opened the trunk and took out the cage. The raccoon hunkered down, stealing occasional small desperate glances at its captor as Buster climbed the levee.

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At the top he stood quietly for a moment, viewing the bridge high overhead with its stream of passing headlights, the vast glow of the city beyond, the lanterns of perambulating barges pushed by huffing tugboats, and the bow and stern lamps of a container ship nudging its way upstream against the rush of murky water. Buster liked to watch scenes of commerce, where the whole world was doing business, and try to think about how he could cut himself in.

Then he yawned and stretched. He'd had a long day — and a boring one, for 2Bad's fate was known in the neighborhood and none of the other local robbers wanted to share it. Time to get home, he thought, as he cut off six feet of cord with his pocket knife and tied it to the handle of the trap.

He carried the trap down the other side of the levee and crossed the *batture* to the muddy verge, where the river slapped lazily at discarded tires and the roots of weeping willows.

He threw the trap into the water with a splash, tied the end of the cord to a willow and returned to the top of the levee.

Inhaling the fresh damp wind, he sat down on the grass and plugged his Walkman into his ear. A rap artist was doing his new hit, "Watch Out, Bitch, I'ma Kill Yo Ass," and Buster kept the rhythm by slapping his thigh.

From time to time he checked his watch, and when twenty minutes had elapsed he returned to the willow, pulled in the cord, dumped the sodden body into the water, and carried his new trap away. Forty-nine-ninety-five was $49.95, and business was business.

MEANTIME, MISS MARGERY was readying herself for bed, so happy to be rid of 2Bad that she began to sing a Gospel song. But the tune didn't last long; she'd had a tiring day, and fell asleep at the click of her bedside lamp. She slept profoundly until midnight, when a dream began to disturb her. Not only because she was being threatened by the world's biggest cottonmouth moccasin, but because — because —

Bathed in sweat, she sat up in bed, listening. She heard nothing except the usual night sounds of an elderly house creaking and settling, much like a sleeper itself, trying one position after another to find rest.

What was it about that snake...? All snakes have sinuous shapes, but

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this one — well, its body almost seemed to be in the shape of — *the number 2*??

Next day Mr. Pandit listened with great interest to Miss Margery's story. A pudgy, dark man with an almost feminine suppleness and softness of manner, he seemed made for sympathetic listening. But he had other reasons for liking Miss Margery.

Sometimes he felt isolated in America, among its clocks and cars, its ferocious and somehow pointless energy, its obsession with numbers, with time, with gadgets. In this depressingly abstract world, Miss Margery's shape-shifting deceased minor thug — even the word *thug* was good Hindi, he reflected — brought Mr. Pandit a breath of home.

After all, karma was still karma, and the cosmos still ran by its ancient laws. That was comforting metaphysically, even if it brought its own dangers to the innocent.

Thoughtfully he contemplated Miss Margery, standing four-ten in her Nike walking shoes and clutching her empty tote bag as if, like the last time, he could put something into it that would solve her problem. A problem that might, he feared, be getting worse instead of better as frustration caused 2Bad's rage to grow.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "you may need a pet."

She stared at him. "I can't keep a cat. It would lay down on my African violets."

"I was not thinking of a cat," he told her. "Actually, it is a pet of mine that I will lend you for a time. His real name is Sredni, but my wife calls him Rikki. You must treat him very well and give him back to me when his work is done."

Miss Margery cocked her head to one side, and her face took on a curious inward look. "Is Rikki built kind of low and long, and has he got smooth brown fur with stripes across the back? And does he move kind of soople-like?"

Mr. Pandit was impressed by this bit of telepathy. Perhaps the Ninth Ward was not as far from Benares as it sometimes seemed. "Yes, yes, you are quite right."

"And does he bite?"

"He has that weakness."

"He's a ferret?"

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"No," said Mr. Pandit. "A mongoose."

Rikki was a sleek and active creature who insisted on exploring every inch of Miss Margery's house before consenting to settle down. He climbed curtains, mounted chairs, inspected the dark area underneath her bed, and spent some time cleaning dust from his fur afterward. When she opened a can of Little Whiskers catfood for his dinner, his sharp almost conical face followed her every movement, his little eyes gleamed, and his predatory thoughts somewhat alarmed her.

But afterward, while she was watching *Jeopardy*, Rikki surged up the arm of her recliner and curled himself into a warm circle in her lap and went to sleep. Cautiously she stroked him, and when he began to make soft sounds and abortive running motions with his short legs, she hit the mute button on her clicker even though Double Jeopardy had just begun.

She stared at Rikki, trying to pick up the flow of dream images behind his furry tight-shut eyes — and suddenly found herself smiling. In his dream, Rikki was killing and eating a cobra, and enjoying every inch of it, thank you very much.

That night he slept at the foot of her bed. And the next night, and the next. He was clean and seemingly housebroken — at any rate, she never found any evidence to the contrary — and they became friends, although when Mr. Pandit visited to check on his pet and drink a cup of tea, it was obvious that Rikki's first love was his Indian family.

So matters went for a week or more. Miss Margery stayed in at night, but then she usually did that anyway; every day she walked Rikki through the garden on his thin plastic leash, letting him explore every nook, and she was careful about checking window screens and burglar bars before she went to bed. When her ladies came by for information about the future, or to meet with deceased relatives whose spirits had not yet found a new home, she introduced them to Rikki and explained that she was sitting him for a friend.

Of course she did her usual housework and washing too. One evening when she was in the stuffy small utility room at the back of her house, loading her second-hand Maytag drier with damp napkins and tablecloths, an unexpected cool breeze caused her to turn her head.

At first she saw nothing out of place. Then with a sense of shock she stared at a six-inch-square vent in the wall. Normally it was blocked by

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a small frame covered with screen wire to exclude bugs. The frame wasn't nailed in, for it had to be removed and the lint wiped off from time to time.

This particular evening, it was lying on the black and white tiles that covered the floor. Miss Margery stood absolutely still, visualizing *something* — she hesitated to think what — crawling up a trellis outside that supported a climbing rose, and entering the aperture.

She envisioned the something pushing out the frame with its...scaly...nose, then flowing down the wall, landing on the floor with a plop and proceeding with silent flickering tongue and a gentle rasp of rough-edged scales along the floor to — to —

She had reached this point in her vision when a great flailing and thumping and thrashing erupted in her bedroom.

The only weapon at hand was a wet mop, so she grabbed it and ran into the bedroom, which had suddenly become silent and seemingly empty. Then a low grinding noise began under the bed. She poked the mophead into the dusty shadow, and Rikki emerged, dragging a yard-long, sausage-fat, brownish-blackish body with him.

He had the snake by the throat and its amber eyes were glazed, its black catlike pupils dilated, its mouth — wide open, and white as some deadly toadstool — displaying inch-long hooked translucent fangs that oozed drops of pale poison.

For a time Rikki hardly moved, his sharp little teeth grinding on the snake's bones. Then he settled down on Miss Margery's floor and ate the whole thing, nose to tail, and cleaned his whiskers afterward.

Miss Margery mopped the floor and they went to bed, Rikki sleeping at her feet. Next morning she returned him to Mr. Pandit, for his work on Mother Cabrini Street was done.

Lily Potter visited later that same day, to plead again for a seance. She wanted to talk to Arthur and make sure that he was safe and happy in that land where — she truly believed — the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

"Poor boy, he had his troubles too," she said, wiping her eyes.

Miss Margery, after what she had seen last night, could only agree. "That's true, Sweetheart, he did. Would you like a root beer, or some tea?"

While they sat and sipped and talked, Miss Margery considered her

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options. The fact was that — having caused Lily's son to be killed twice — she was feeling somewhat ill at ease in her friend's presence. Perhaps it was her sense of guilt that made her, against her better judgment, agree to hold the seance.

She knew the dangers only too well. What, after all, did a medium do in a seance but offer herself up for possession by whatever spirit happened to be wandering nearby? Yet surely by this time 2Bad had slipped another link or two down the great chain of being, his spirit again imprisoned in some new and lowly body — preferably an earthworm.

So she decided to comfort her friend by faking a few sappy messages of the kind Lily obviously wanted *(I've seen the light; I love you, Mama; my soul is at peace)* and send her home oblivious to 2Bad's too bad fate. Miss Margery disliked putting words into the mouths of the dead, but she felt that the exception proved the rule.

"I'll do it, Lily Honey, but I won't take no money for it," she said, to salve her own conscience.

Miss Margery conducted her seances at night, preferably rather late, when the traffic on St. Claude Avenue had quieted down. That evening she washed and put away her dinner things, moved a small veneer table to the center of her living room, screwed a red bulb into a lamp and doused it with Fatima sandalwood incense.

From a cabinet she took out what she called the Weegee — an old-fashioned Ouija board, which was by far the easiest way to fake a message. She laid the Weegee on the table and used a dustcloth to wipe the alphabet, the numbers zero through nine, and the Yes and No; she polished the pointer, a plastic arrowhead about eight inches long riding on three felt-cushioned feet, and set it at the center of the board. Finally, she turned out all the lights except the red bulb, put a cassette called *Satchmo Plays* in her old boombox and turned the sound down low.

As she headed for the bathroom to freshen up, Louis Armstrong's gravelly voice launched into "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." While passing a comb through her graying hair, Miss Margery began to remember a sunny Mardi Gras day — oh, so long ago — when she'd seen him in person at the parade of the Zulu Social and Pleasure Club, riding the royal float as King. She remembered her Mama's delight when she caught one of the gilded royal coconuts, and how Satchmo whipped out his trumpet and

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started to play, and how everybody began dancing along Melpomene Street.

Miss Margery sang along with him tonight, and she was trilling, "I am weak, but Thou art strong," when she heard the doorbell ring.

As she crossed her bedroom on the way to the front of the house, she was astonished to see a very big cockroach — the kind that local boosters like to brag are the size of compact cars — running crazily this way and that on the wall at the head of her bed. Worse, it was scattering its tobacco-juice waste as it ran.

Miss Margery needed no help dealing with a roach. In one swift movement she swept a slipper up from the floor by the bed and smacked the bug. Then, making a face, she fetched toilet tissue, removed it from the wall, and flushed it.

A minute later she was opening the front door and welcoming Lily in. Maybe she had moved too fast; she certainly had no time to see that there was a pattern to the nasty droplets left by the cockroach, a pattern that might be interpreted as the number 2. And in that case a troubled and troublesome spirit might now be wandering between bodies, in a sort of limbo.

Lily was disappointed by her first sight of the Weegee. "I *had* hoped to hear his voice one last time," she sighed.

"Honey, you may do that if I trances. Thing is, you can't tell what a spirit may want to do. It may want to point, it may want to knock, it may want to rock the table, or it may want to talk out loud. Now, you just try to be accepting, okay? It ain't up to you; it ain't up to me. It's up to 2 — to Arthur."

The ladies sat down facing each other across the card table, and lightly rested their fingertips on the pointer. Louis was singing hoarsely in his black-yat accent, "Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear, and he shows them poily white...." As the red bulb heated up, the fragrance of sandalwood filled the air. A sunset glow suffused the room; all the shadows had soft edges.

Miss Margery sat quietly, letting anticipation rise. It was past her bedtime and she was feeling sleepy. In a minute she'd give the pointer a shove, just enough to attract Lily's attention. Then spell out...what did 2Bad used to call his mother...no, she wouldn't spell out You Old Bitch, that wouldn't do at all....

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She must have dozed off. A crash woke her as the boombox went flying. Furious knocking began. A cry from Lily made her look down. The pointer was travelling across the board, and Miss Margery wasn't guiding it. The movement was jerky, as if the sharp end was stabbing the letters. *KILLKILLKILLKILLKILL*, the message raged.

"Oh!" whispered Lily in awe, "It's...*it's Arthur!!*"

But Miss Margery hardly heard her. Suddenly the pointer flew out from under her fingers and bounced off the far wall. A final fusillade of raps sent the table and the Weegee clattering down, and at the same moment something awful began invading her.

For a moment she felt as if she'd swallowed poison. She hated everybody and everything; she hated flowers, the green earth, God Almighty. She hated herself; she hated Lily. Her mouth dropped open as if she were a ventriloquist's dummy, as if her jaw were on a metal hinge and she heard a strange voice shouting, "*Ain't no Arthur, you old bitch! Watch out Mama, gonna leave you in a ditch!*"

Healthy bodies vomit poison; healthy minds do the same. With a heroic effort she pushed 2Bad out of her head, only to see mild-mannered Lily Potter jump to her feet with her face twisting in rage and begin to howl, "*Got you now, you fuckin' whore! Run if you can! Run for the door!*"

With that she lunged, the spark of murder in her eyes. But she tripped on the fallen table and went sprawling, and before she could recover Miss Margery had fled. Out the door, her Nikes slapping the boards, down the steps, through the gate, along dark Mother Cabrini Street to the corner of St. Claude Avenue where, under a streetlight, Officer Buster was just seeing Mr. Wang into his police car.

It was the first time in her life Miss Margery had ever been glad to see Buster. His roan eyes stared at the sight of a small white lady pounding after an even smaller black one and roaring in a male voice, "*When I git you, you be dead! Stomp yo titties, stomp yo head!*"

Miss Margery ran behind Buster's hulking form and had just time to register the fact that Mr. Wang's eyes were, for once in his life, wide. Then Buster grabbed Lily with a left hand that was roughly the size of her whole head, while his right hand drew his Glock.

Miss Margery cried, "No, no, no!" fearing he would kill Lily by habit, or simply because he enjoyed it. But Lily saved herself by suddenly

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folding up like a deck chair and collapsing on the broken pavement.

A few long silent seconds followed — and yet somehow not silent, thought Miss Margery: more as if a bat were darting above, uttering shrieks she couldn't quite hear. Then Buster spun slowly around, Glock in hand.

His eyes had rolled up into his head and showed only a roadmap of tiny blood vessels. Miss Margery knew that now 2Bad had taken possession of his killer. And of the officer's gun as well.

With that a great calmness came over her, for she knew that this life was over, that she had nothing more to fear from 2Bad, that as far as she was concerned, death itself was dead. She hoped that somebody nice would buy her house, that the money would help take care of her brother Daryle with the sugar diabetes, and that her sister-in-law would be kind to the African violets.

Where would her spirit wind up? She didn't know, but she knew she would do her best in whatever new position the cosmos assigned her. She raised her eyes to heaven and said quietly, "Such as I am, you got me."

But Buster had begun to go through horrific changes. He was fighting 2Bad, and his whole body bucked and twisted and his eyes first crossed and then somehow turned away from each other, as if he were watching both ends of St. Claude Avenue at once. Blood burst from his nose and he waved the Glock this way and that, one shot exploding high, another smashing into the blacktop.

Then he — whoever, at the moment, *he* might have been — turned the weapon against his own face and pulled the trigger a last time.

"Now, which one do you think it was killed the other?" Miss Margery asked Mr. Pandit, on her next trip to the Super-Mini.

He shrugged. "Does it matter?"

All pious Hindus wished to die in Mr. Pandit's home town of Benares, to be cremated there on the burning ghats and have their ashes committed to the holy Ganges. To him death was ritualized, omnipresent, familiar. In any case, it was only a kind of cosmic revolving door that proved nothing and ended nothing, and it did not interest him very much.

Instead, he worried about the living. "How is Mrs. Potter?" he asked.

"Don't remember a thing, thank the Lord. Rikki doing okay?"

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"Very well. However, I think he would like a cobra. I have written my relatives in India, and they will try to send me one."

He rang up her purchases — a sixpack of root beer, a roll of paper towels, and a box of Constant Comment teabags. Miss Margery paid him and then, taking advantage of the air conditioning, idled up one aisle and down the other, looking at labels and humming to herself.

At the storeroom door she hesitated, then pushed it open. The room was quiet and empty except for a pyramid of cardboard boxes full of supplies. Buster's throne of crates had been dismantled. Everything looked clean and ready for surprise inspections by the Department of Health.

Miss Margery stood there quietly for a few moments, thinking of Oscar Buster and the predatory life he had pursued across the ages, and wondering where he was now, and how low 2Bad might have sunk after his last escapade. Then a tiny movement in a dark corner caught her eye.

She moved closer and bent over. An earwig — she would have called it a scissor-bug — was running desperately along the wall, trying to escape a centipede that flowed after it with a strange swimming motion. As she watched, the hundred-legs caught the earwig, grappled with it, and began tearing it limb from limb.

Sighing, Miss Margery retreated, allowing the storeroom door to whisper shut behind her. She made sure her purchases were well packed in the Tupperware bag, and then set out for home. Her ladies were coming at ten for tea and Tarot, and she had some getting ready to do.

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Over the past eight years, Steven Utley has been spinning out time-travel tales of an unusual sort — they concern the opening of a time portal in the near future that lets people return to the Silurian Age. In the latest such adventure, Lisa resists George's advances, Dianne is accused by Lewis of having plotted with Karen to convince Howard that he and not Bill is the father of Cindy's son Nick's fiancé Susan, and Sally is hit by a truck.

Or not.

Invisible Kingdoms

By Steven Utley

MR. CAHILL, A PLUM OF A man during his prime, attained and passed the century mark in rather a prune-like condition. He was not only extremely long-lived but extremely wealthy, in direct consequence of his having given the world IntelliGelatin™, whence, the host of other products bearing his inviolable ™, such as AnswerMan™, TellMe™, MemoryMat™, and that salvation of many a writing-challenged author, Ediot™. Wealth enabled him to compensate for the ravages of age by enclosing himself in an exoskeleton of advanced design — personally designed, in fact, in close collaboration with one of IntelliGelatin™'s amazing progeny, MechMaven™. (Fittingly, only Mr. Cahill could be said to have had a close relationship with the IntelliGelatin™ clan, though practically everyone else in the world necessarily had an intimate one.) Unaided, Mr. Cahill lacked the strength to do much more than wiggle his fingers and toes, but these feeble touches sufficed to direct the exoskeleton's complete array of proxies for his spindly limbs, dimmed eyes, deafened ears, whispery voice.

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Thus, enclosed deep inside the glistening metal shell, the ridiculous remnant of Mr. Cahill's body served chiefly to direct souped-up NanoImmunoTechs™ to various trouble spots within itself, and to house Mr. Cahill's brain, as vital, alert, and formidable an organ as ever. Or so SpokesMom™ declared. During his first century Mr. Cahill had been not merely a productive member of society but rather an extroverted one as well. Thus, when, at the onset of his second century, he let it become known through SpokesMom™ that he no longer particularly cared for human society, that he now meant to enter upon a quite private existence, a popular newstar expressed doubt. "That doesn't sound like him at all."

"For all the time he's spent in the public eye," said SpokesMom™, "very few people see the real person."

"Still," said the newstar, "he's always been such an outgoing sort, with such an exuberant personality, like an overgrown kid."

"He's served the world admirably. Now he wants time for his favorite hobbies, time for himself. He's entitled to his privacy just like everyone else."

This last remark occasioned bitter laughter and impolite remarks among subversives and members of the criminal classes, many of whom had unhappy experiences with the bad boy of the IntelliGelatin™ family, PsychePick™. But they were, after all, subversives and criminals, and even if they had not been, nobody was going to call SpokesMom™ on it. SpokesMom™ was just too sweet and kindly, having been cunningly designed to warm even the hearts of people who had never got along with their own mothers. And, also, nobody wanted to have to answer to PsychePick™.

Nevertheless, a squad of officers and agents, in and out of uniform, representing the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Customs Service, the Center for Disease Control, and several other agencies, backed by a meticulously prepared secret indictment, and commanded by a ferocious man named Selby, showed up at Mr. Cahill's door with the intention of taking him into their custody.

This was the culmination of an investigation that had begun some four hundred million years earlier.

It must be understood that the discovery (never mind how made) of

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a "spacetime anomaly" (never mind how created) had opened a way into a Paleozoic sort of Earth-like world (never mind how identified as such). Suffice it to say that this heteroclite phenomenon was duly exploited by an expedition comprising various scientific teams and a support force of U.S. Navy personnel.

Now imagine a pebble — no, a fair-sized stone — has just been dropped into a pool of still water. The stone is a Navy enlisted man who wished to supplement his income and meant to do so by smuggling Paleozoic biological specimens. He was apprehended at the point of returning to the twenty-first century laden with contraband. There would be dramatic personality clashes, death threats, gunplay, close shaves, strong language, and a steamy romance to enliven the proceedings if Ediot™ were telling the story. A hero or heroine selected or synthesized from the team of investigators would display particular cleverness and pluck in following the smugglers' trail from that enlisted man through a number of intermediaries back to Mr. Cahill. In reality, though, such melodramatic possibilities weren't realized: the enlisted man promptly implicated a civilian member of the Paleozoic expedition, who told on another civilian member, and so forth. The various agencies, and there were plenty of them, cooperated in exemplary fashion. And so, to continue the original metaphor of the stone splashing into a pool of still water, the disturbance spreading outward from one feckless and hapless bluejacket ultimately washed away the careers of several members of the scientific community, on both this and that side (so to speak) of the famous "anomaly." Eventually, the ripples lapped at Mr. Cahill's doorstep, in the form of law enforcement officers, none of whom had ever visited the Paleozoic, or wanted to.

SELBY AND HIS PEOPLE had had to show up, however, at several of Mr. Cahill's doors before they found the right one. SpokesMom™ had met them each time. The first time, asked to tender their authorizations for inspection, Selby demurred, and SpokesMom™ told him, "Oh, it's all right, Mister Selby, I now have durable power of attorney."

"That's impossible," he hissed. "It can't be legal. Artificial intelligence can't —"

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"Oh, but I'm sure you're wrong, Mister Selby," and SpokesMom™ cited The Law, as it had been amended (though she did not mention this) by Mr. Cahill's money and influence.

Selby's color was by now not good. "Tell your Mister Cahill," he said to SpokesMom™, "that if I ever get my hands on him, I'll personally prep him for PsychePick™."

"Oh, I doubt that," said SpokesMom™, with invincible motherly optimism.

Thereafter, whenever Selby and his people showed up somewhere in search of Mr. Cahill, SpokesMom™ met them graciously, always examined the documents as though seeing them for the first time, always allowed them to search the premises, always reminded them as they tromped in that they would be closely monitored, of course, and that they shouldn't scuff their heels on Mr. Cahill's parquet floors and expensive carpets. Always, they failed to find Mr. Cahill. Moreover, Mr. Cahill's various sumptuously appointed homes and offices had been discreetly stripped of anything that might have tied him to criminal activity occurring 400 million years in the past.

Eventually, though, through a process of elimination, the officers appeared at the right door, that of a supposedly empty warehouse in a disused industrial complex. After posting agents by the side and rear exits, Selby and three others entered the reception area, to be met, not by a receptionist, human or simulated, but, as usual, by a robutler somewhat on the order of a perambulating samovar. This robutler's appearance had always preceded that of SpokesMom™ by a few minutes, and by now Selby had said privately that if he didn't know better, he'd think it was the same robutler each time. It always brought with it a heavenly aroma of freshly brewed coffee, and a little door popped open in the front of its cylindrical body to reveal a Lazy Susan set with everything from cups to an assortment of freshly baked tea cakes. It always said, simulating the tone and attitude of somebody's idea of an English person, male, in domestic service, *circa* 1900, "Perhaps you would care for some refreshment," and Selby always said, "No," and occasionally one of the subordinate or otherwise attendant members of his party would go so far as to chime in with, "No, thank you very much." Selby would give the robutler the usual glowering look and asked, as usual, "Where is Mister Cahill?" and

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SpokesMom™ would appear (fresh, it always seemed, from taking an apple pie out of the oven) to examine their documents again and let them search the place. They would proceed warily, needlessly careful of the small humming housekeeping robots that darted expertly around their big clumsy feet, sucking up the dust they had tracked in. The first time, an agent had remarked on the robots' bug-like appearance, and SpokesMom™ had helpfully informed him that the things were modeled on prehistoric marine arthropods called trilobites, and added that there was one that stayed outside, shaped like a sea scorpion, that did the garden work. "For claws, it has various tools of a sharp, pointy nature, so be careful if you go poking around in the flower beds." Selby interpreted this as a thinly veiled threat of physical violence, but there was nothing he could do. It wasn't as though he could arrest SpokesMom™. After a few raids on Mr. Cahill's "places," the agents became inured to his notions of decoration, which ran to a sort of Victorian muchness with, here and there amid the lush appointments, the gleam of chrome on an ultra-modern appliance. "Looks like Jules Verne's subconscious," Agent Nolan had said, and another agent looked at her and asked, "Who?" and was told, "Never mind. The man's a packrat." This had prompted SpokesMom™ to say, "A packrat presides over *clutter*, Agent Nolan. Mister Cahill is a *collector*. A collector knowingly and willing imposes order on chaos. Are you sure nobody would like a fresh cruller?"

This time, things were different. This time, the robutler said, in a voice quite unlike anyone's idea of an English domestic servant, "This is Cahill speaking."

Selby and his people looked at the thing with the first fresh interest they had felt in weeks.

"Where are you, Mister Cahill?"

"Inside this machine. Close by. All around. Everywhere." A merry giggle, like that of a hyperactive nine-year-old, emanated from the ambulatory samovar. "They don't call me 'The World's Most Plugged-In Man' for nothing, you know."

"We have been trying to find you for some time now, Mister Cahill."

"So I hear. I've been under the weather for a while. I'm fine now."

"SpokesMom™ did not tell us that you were ill."

"SpokesMom™ is very protective."

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"We've noticed. Do you understand why we're here?"

"Of course. SpokesMom™ has my mouthpiece standing by."

Some of the officers looked at one another in confusion. The robutler giggled. "Forgive me. I have a serious addiction to pulp fiction, among other ancient things. It dates me. I bet you didn't even bother to use truncheons on the people who fingered me. Anyway, my *attorney* is standing by. I'm being advised to shut up. I am advising my attorney to shut up. SpokesMom™ is advising me that I'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar and I should be polite. Well, won't you please come on in?"

The robutler moved aside. The rear wall of the reception room slid open to reveal an airlock.

The officers regarded it nervously.

"A necessary precaution," said Mr. Cahill.

No one moved. Someone muttered a curse and someone else asked disgustedly, "Why don't we just storm the damn place?"

"This," said Selby, "really isn't acceptable."

"I'm afraid you are going to have to trust me on this." After several seconds, Mr. Cahill added, "Please," and then, "If you don't mind."

"Sir," someone asked Selby, "you think we can really talk him out of there — assuming he's really in there?"

"I know Cahill only by reputation. They say he got very weird around the time he turned eighty."

"Oh, *do* hurry, before I make my escape."

Selby asked, "Why *aren't* you escaping, Mister Cahill?"

The answer did not come quite at once. Then: "Perhaps I'm tired of evading arrest. It's too easy. Perhaps I feel like resisting arrest for a change. Actually, I have something to show you. Something wonderful."

"This will be better for everyone," said Selby, "if you'll just give yourself up and, ah, not — not do like this."

"Not do like this." Mr. Cahill sighed. "You're here to make the arrest of your career, and the best you can come up with is, Not Do Like This. The rhetoric of crime fighting has devolved lamentably since the days when the weed of crime bore bitter fruit. Please proceed, officers."

Selby exhaled harshly. "Okay, Nolan, you come with me. You two stay here. You know what to do."

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He and Agent Nolan entered the airlock. The outer door slid shut behind them. A little rack holding respirator masks twirled before them, and SpokesMom™ appeared from somewhere and said, all motherly solicitude, "Be sure to put those on before you go inside. The mold and mildew counts are right through the ceiling."

Selby and Nolan donned the masks. The inner door slid open. Nolan said, "My God."

An expanse of slime-topped reeking mud extended the length and breadth of the building's interior. Selby and Nolan had been adequately briefed; they recognized the Paleozoic vista.

"What've you done?" growled Selby. "Jesus Christ, Cahill, what've you *done*?"

"Welcome to my forbidden garden." The agents could not pinpoint the source of Mr. Cahill's voice now that he no longer deigned to speak through a robutler. He seemed to be all around them, suffusing the very air. "The accommodations here are not up to my other places. This is, after all, just a converted warehouse."

Selby and Nolan breathed in the warm thick humid air and smelled green mud ripe with organic decay, and Selby suddenly sneezed, and Nolan coughed. Their throats itched.

"Something in here doesn't like us," Nolan said.

Selby plucked at the front of his shirt. "I'm drenched already. It's like a hothouse in here."

"It *is* a hothouse in here," said the disembodied Mr. Cahill. "This structure encloses as nearly perfect a replication of a Silurian estuarine ecosystem as it is possible to make. Just as a few dabs of genetic material supplied templates for full-grown Silurian organisms, a few samples of Silurian soil, air, water, sufficed for the synthesis of Silurian soil, air, water — the ingredients haven't changed in four hundred million years. I had hoped to create a Silurian marine environment, too, but — ahem — my source was cut off before I had everything I needed. And there's no point in creating an imbalanced ecosystem, at least not on this scale. I'm serious about my hobbies. But you probably know that already. You have, of course, visited my home in town. My Xanadu. Hands up if you know what I'm talking about. Either of you ever seen *Citizen Kane*? The original or the remakes? No? Well, then, you are just going to have to take my word

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for it that it is my Xanadu, with the important, the vital and essential difference that I collect things not just for the sake of collecting things, but for love of the things themselves." He giggled again.

"Bug-nut crazy," Selby whispered.

"Crazy or not," said Mr. Cahill, apparently taking no offense, "I have been fortunate in my long life to be able to indulge my appetite for all manner of delightful things. Good paintings, exotic tropical fish, rare blooms. You saw my lovely antiques, my first editions, comic books, manuscripts, trays of coins and beetles and butterflies, twentieth-century film memorabilia, classic toys — ah, my train sets! my toy soldiers! I never was a snob, you know. High art and low have always met smack in the middle of my brow. I used to joke that I was wracked by a unique philosophical dilemma. I knew what I liked, but how did I know what I knew?"

Selby stepped forward, and Mr. Cahill told him, "Please don't tread there. To your left you'll see a narrow catwalk curving away through that stand of bushy plants. Those are *Barangwathia*, by the way. Follow the catwalk. It will eventually lead you to me. But stop along the way to smell the psilophytes."

Selby and Nolan advanced carefully along the catwalk. It looped and dipped above the muddy earth, and both agents decided independently of each other that anybody careless enough to fall off the catwalk would probably be sucked under instantly. They noticed rather large segmented things nosing around below, too, and wanted no part of them.

"You must believe me," said Mr. Cahill, "when I tell you I started out getting just a few prehistoric sea creatures for my exotic tropical fish tank, in the way, you see, of one-upping everyone else who had exotic tropical fish. What are piranha to sea scorpions and trilobites? Not even a coelacanth could compare to an ostracoderm. So. I would have the ultimate in exotic tropical fish. It all goes back to my sea-monkeys, you know. Remember sea-monkeys?"

Selby said, in not quite a questioning tone, "Sea-monkeys."

"A nickname for brine shrimp. They were advertised in comic books."

"Comic books," said Nolan, in a somewhat more questioning tone.

"Comic books," Mr. Cahill said, sounding impatient for the first

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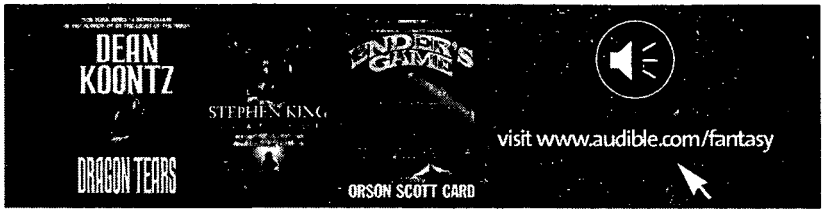

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time. "Sensationally written, mostly indifferently illustrated, luridly colored, cheaply printed periodicals. Superman. Spider-Man. Archie and his pals and gals. I loved the things. I have thousands in my collection."

"Of course," said Selby, patently unimpressed.

"Ah," said Nolan, though she patently still did not know what a comic book was, and they kept walking.

"Well, these comic books contained advertisements. The advertisement that captured my young self's imagination was an advertisement for sea-monkeys on the back cover of a comic book. I clipped the order blank from it and mailed it off with a money order, and after a while I received a little package containing brine-shrimp eggs. They came complete with instructions. I put them in water, and they hatched into brine shrimp. At first I was terribly disappointed, because they bore no resemblance to the creatures depicted in the advertisement, which were sort of *merprimates* with big happy smiles. But I became fascinated with them in spite of my initial disappointment. My own personal colony, my own *kingdom*, of sea-monkeys! I showed them off to my parents, relatives, friends. I *grieved* when they died. Brine shrimp are such brief-lived things. But there were

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always more where they'd come from. The same advertisement ran in the same comic books for years on end. I have since owned many exotic tropical fish, but my sea-monkeys, ah! I cannot say how many generations of brine-shrimp lived and died under my watchful eye. My empire of invertebrates, ha ha! You never forget your first love."

"I'm afraid," Selby said, "I still don't understand — "

"Of course you don't understand. I haven't finished explaining. So. Let's leap ahead the better part of a century from the halcyon days of my youth. When I saw the news about the hole in time, the expedition, the prehistoric world — ah! I burned with the torments of the damned. I'd never be able to visit, and yet. And yet. And *then*. Then I remembered the advertisement in the comic books. I remembered how it had excited my imagination and how I'd grown to adore my brine shrimp. And the line just popped into my head — 'Boys, raise giant sea scorpions in your aquarium!'

"There was the pesky detail of the ban on removing specimens for other than scientific purposes. Of course, I dropped broad hints to sundry and all that I was willing and able to pay for an expedition or two out of petty cash. Penury makes scientists so opportunistic. It's not pretty to see. I *refused* to be satisfied with the gratitude of the scientific community, with having a new species of marine worm and an ancient landmark named in my honor in token of its esteem. They even tried to buy me off with a dead trilobite sealed inside a clear plastic paperweight. I contrived to stock my tank with fabulous creatures from Paleozoic seas. Then I started my Paleozoic terrarium. *Then* it occurred to me that glass-sided tanks were all well and fine in their way, but I wanted — I wanted the full Paleozoic experience. Creatures, plants, even air and soil. And here we are! What good is a collection that can't be shown off?"

The catwalk ended at a platform set against the rear wall of the building. Here they found what could only be Mr. Cahill, sitting slumped inside his exoskeleton, whose delicate mechanisms had withstood the effects of the simulated Paleozoic environment better than he. The humid atmosphere was ideal for bacteria and fungi, and they had made short work of his corpse.

"Jesus," said Selby. "And I thought it was just this damn homemade swamp that needed sterilizing."

Both he and Nolan let out a squeak when they heard the dead man's disembodied voice again. "Tell 'em, SpokesMom™."

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The air on the platform shimmered. SpokesMom™ appeared and said, sweetly, "Remember who has durable power of attorney. We intend to take good care of Mister Cahill's interests. I'm afraid you can't sterilize this place as yet, and perhaps not ever. Mister Cahill's options have hardly been exhausted."

"Mister Cahill is dead."

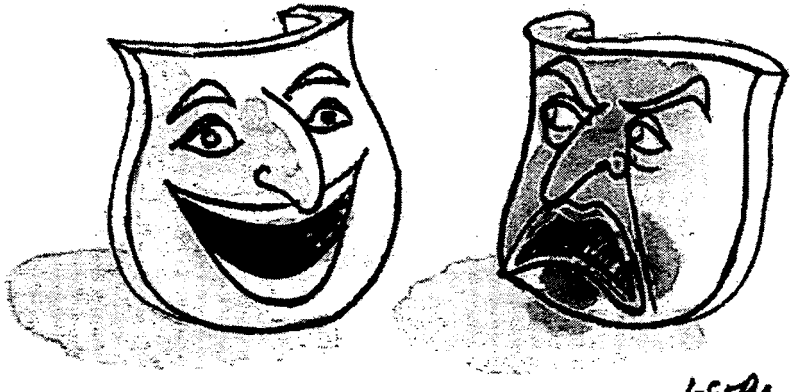
"Technically, not officially. Fortunately, he and the clan had become virtually consubstantial by the time the exoskeleton's life-support systems failed. As you can see, we were able to synthesize him. It was the least we could do. He *created* us. He was *family*. He'd been so determined to see his dream to fruition, we had no choice but to make it possible for him to do so. You are the first people he's had a chance to show it off to."

Selby bared his teeth. "We're also the *only* people who're going to see it, except the sterilization team."

"We will of course do all we legally can to preserve this garden, just as we mean to preserve his various collections, as memorials to him."

"The autopsy ought to be very interesting. From the looks of things, this particular memorial may have killed him!"

"Oh, I always *told* him to put on his respirator mask before he came in here," said SpokesMom™, a bit reproachfully and with a wetly glistening eye, "but he was just an overgrown boy, and you know how careless boys can be."



"You've lost touch with reality!"

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Daryl Gregory's F&SF *debut was "In the Wheels" back in our August 1990 issue. After a long absence, he is writing again and here's the first of two new stories we'll be publishing, an odd story to say the least, but nothing to sneeze at.*

Free, and Clear

By Daryl Gregory

WARILY, EDWARD TOLD Margaret his fantasy.

It's Joe Louis Arena in late August, peak allergy season. He's in the ring with Joe Louis himself, and as Edward dances around the canvas his sinuses feel like impacted masonry. Pollen floats in the air, his eyes are watering, and everything beyond the ring is a blur. Joe Louis is looking *strong:* smooth glistening chest, fierce gaze, arms pumping like oil rigs. Edward wipes his nose on his glove and shuffles forward. Joe studies him, waiting, drops his guard a few inches. Edward sees his opening and swings, a sweeping roundhouse. Joe sidesteps easily and the blow misses completely. Edward is stumbling forward, off balance and wide open. He looks up as Joe Louis's fist crashes into his face — but it's not Joe's normal fist, it's the giant Joe Louis Fist sculpture that hangs from chains in the Detroit Plaza, and it's swinging down, down. Two tons of metal slam into Edward's skull and shatter his zygomatic lobe like a nut. Sinus fluid runs like hot syrup down his chest and over his silk boxing shorts.

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"That's what I like to think about the most," Edward told her. "That hot liquid draining."

His wife stared at him. "I don't think I can take this much longer," she said.

The address led them to an austere brick building in an aging industrial park.

"It doesn't look like a massage parlor," Edward said.

"It's a *clinic*," Margaret said. "For massage *therapy*."

Edward could feel a sneeze gearing up behind the bridge of his nose. He pulled a few tissues from the Kleenex box on the dash, reconsidered, and took the whole box. "I don't think this is going to help," he said. It was the first line in an argument they'd performed several times in the past week. Margaret only looked at him. He sneezed. In the back seat his four-year-old son laughed.

Edward lightly kissed Margaret on the cheek, then reached over the seat to shake hands with Michael. "Be a soldier," Edward said, and Michael nodded. The boy's nose was running, and Edward handed him a tissue.

Margaret put the car in gear. "I'll pick you up in an hour. Good luck."

"Good luck!" Michael yelled. Edward wished they didn't sound so desperate.

The waiting room was cedar-paneled and heavy with cinnamon incense (heavy, he knew, because he could smell it). There was a reception desk, but no receptionist, so he sat on the edge of a wicker couch in the position he assumed when waiting — for allergists; endocrinologists; eye, ear, nose, and throat specialists — his left hand holding the wad of Kleenex, his right thumb pressed up against the ridge of bone above his right eye, as if he were working up the courage to blind himself. Periodically he separated a tissue from the wad, blew into it, switched the moist clump to his other hand, and wedged his other thumb against the left eye. It was all very tedious.

A chubby white woman in a sari skittered up to him and held out her hand. "You're Ed!" she said in a perky whisper. "How are you?"

He smoothly tucked the Kleenex under his thigh, and as he lifted his hand he ran his palm against the side of his pants, a combination hide-and-clean move he'd perfected over the years. "Just fine, thanks."

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"Would you like some tea?" she asked. "There are some cups over there you can use."

She gestured toward the reception desk where a mahogany tree of ceramic mugs sat next to an electric teapot. What he wanted, he thought, was a syringe to force a pint of steaming Earl Grey up his nose; what he wanted was a nasal enema. He said no thanks, his voice gravelly from phlegm, and she told him that the therapist would be available in a moment, would he like to walk this way, please? He followed her down a cedar-paneled hallway, tinny sitar music hovering overhead, and she left him in a dim room with a massage table, wicker chair, and a row of cabinets. A dozen plants hung darkly along the edges of the room, suspended by macramé chains.

He looked around, wondering if he should take off his clothes. His wife had read him articles about reflexology, but he couldn't remember if nakedness was one of the requirements. Once she'd shown him a diagram in *Cosmopolitan:* "Everything corresponds to something else, like in voodoo," Margaret had said. "You press one spot in the middle of your foot, and that's your kidney. Or you press here, and those are your lungs. And look, Hon." She pointed at the toes in the illustration. "The tops of the four little toes are all for sinuses." He asked about people with extra toes, what would those correspond to, but something interrupted — tea kettle or telephone — and she never answered.

He sat on the table rather than the chair because it was what he did in most examination rooms. When the door opened he was in the middle of blowing his nose. The masseuse was short, with frizzy brown hair. She waited politely until he was finished, and then said, "Hello, Edward. I'm Annit." Annit? Her accent was British or Australian, which somehow reassured him; foreigners always seemed more knowledgeable than Americans.

"Hi," he said. Her hand was very warm when they shook.

"You have a cold?" she asked sympathetically.

"No, no." He touched the bridge of his nose. "Allergies."

"Ah." She stared at the place where he'd touched. The pupils of her eyes were wet black, like beach pebbles.

"Can't seem to get rid of them," he said finally.

She nodded. "Have you seen a doctor?" Obvious questions normally annoyed him, but her sincerity was disarming. The accent, probably.

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"I've seen everyone," he said. "Every specialist my insurance would cover, and a few that I paid for myself. I've taken every kind of pill that I'm not allergic to." He chuckled to show he was a good sport.

"What *are* you allergic to?"

He paused a moment to blow into a tissue. "They don't know, really. So far I seem to be allergic to nothing in specific and everything in general." She stared at his nose. "Allergies are cumulative, see? Some people are allergic to cats and, say, carpet mites. But if there's carpet mites but no cat around, they aren't bothered. Cat plus carpet mites, they sneeze. Or six cats, they sneeze. They haven't come up with a serum that blocks everything I'm allergic to, so I sneeze at everything."

"For you," she said, "it's like there are six cats around all the time?"

"Six hundred cats."

"Oh!" She looked genuinely concerned. She jotted something on the clipboard in her hand. "I have to ask a few other questions. Do you have any back injuries?" He shook his head. "Arthritis? Toothaches, diabetes, emphysema, heart disease? Ulcers, tumors, or other growths? Migraines?"

"Yes! Well, headaches, anyway. Sinus-related."

She made a mark on the clipboard. "Anything else you think you should tell me?"

He paused. Should he tell her about the toe? "No," he said.

"Okay, then. I think I can help you." She set down the clipboard and took his hand. In the poor light her eyes seemed coal black. "Edward, we are going to do some intense body work today. Do you know what the key is to therapeutic success?" She pronounced it "sucsase."

He shook his head. She was hard to follow, but he loved listening to her.

"*Trust*, Edward." She squeezed his hand. "The client-therapist relationship is based on trust. We'll have to work together if we're going to effect change. Do you want to change, Edward?"

He cleared his throat and nodded. "Yes. Of course."

"Then you *can*. But. Only if we trust each other. Do you understand?" All that eye contact.

"I understand."

"Okay, Edward," she said briskly. "Get undressed and get under the sheet. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He quickly removed his clothes and left them folded on the floor.

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Should he lie face up or down? Did she tell him? Down seemed the safer choice.

He struggled with the sheet and finally got it to cover him. Then he set his face into the padded doughnut and exhaled.

Okay now, he thought. Just relax.

Almost immediately, the tip of his nose began to itch and burn. A hot dollop of snot eased out of his left nostril.

He'd left his Kleenex with his clothes.

He scrambled out of the bed, grabbed the box, and got back under the sheet. Ah, facial tissue, his addiction. Like a good junkie, he always knew exactly how much product was in the room and where it was located. While making love he kept a box near the bed. He preferred entering Margaret from behind because it kept his sinuses upright and let him sneak tissues unseen.

Edward propped himself on his elbows and blew, squeezed the other nostril shut and blew again. He looked around for a place to toss the tissue. At work he had two plastic trash bins: a public one out in the open, and a small one hidden in the well of his desk to hold the used Kleenex. But he didn't see a trash can anywhere in the room. Was it hidden in the cabinets?

A knock at the door. Edward pitched the tissue toward his clothes and put his head back in the doughnut. "Okay!" he called casually. He tried to arrange his arms into what he hoped looked like a natural position.

The door opened behind him and he felt her warm hand on his shoulder. "Feel free to grunt and make noises," she said.

"What's that?"

She peeled back half of the sheet and cool air rippled across his skin. "Make noises," she said. "I like feedback." He heard a liquid fart as she squirted something from a bottle, and then felt her oiled hands press into the muscles around his neck.

Well, *that* felt good. Should he tell her now, or wait until it got even better? And what feedback noises were appropriate?

Ropes began to unkink in his back. She used long, deep strokes for a time, then focused on smaller areas. She pressed an elbow into the muscle that ran along his spine; at first it felt like she was using a steel rod, but after thirty seconds of constant pressure something unclenched inside

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him and the whole muscle expanded, softened. "You work at a computer?" she asked.

It took him a moment to realize it was a question, a moment more to remember how to answer. "Uh-huh," he said. His mind had gone liquid. Grunt to give feedback, he thought.

Annit was strong for being so small. She finished his back, then rearranged the sheet to do his legs. The top half of him was loose as a fish, but from lower back to his feet he was aching with tightness. How could he not have noticed this before now? When a long stroke reached to his buttock he felt the first twinge of an erection, but then she pressed her thumbs between the muscles of his legs and he could think of nothing but the cold fire of cinched muscles stretching apart.

Time became slippery. He might have fallen asleep if it weren't for the persistent tightness in his forehead and eyes. Still blocked. It's what Margaret would ask as she watched him honk into a Kleenex: Still blocked? Still. Always. Margaret would circulate the house, emitting little disgusted sounds as she plucked hardened clumps of tissue from the kitchen table, from between the cushions of the couch, from inside his forgotten coffee cups. "Why don't you take another pill?" she would ask, irritated. But Margaret was a free-breather and could not understand. Antihistamines clamped down on his nasal passages, setting up killer headaches. Pseudoephedrine only made his nose drip incessantly without ever coming close to draining his constantly refilling reservoirs of snot. "Here, Daddy," Michael would say, and hand him a tissue.

Annit touched his neck. "Okay, Edward," she said very quietly. "Let's turn over."

She held up the sheet between them and cool air hit his skin. He rolled onto his side and had to stop himself from rolling right off the table. He shuffled his body over and Annit let the sheet settle over him like a parachute.

His nose was full and a sneeze was growing. "Could I...." He looked for the Kleenex box. "Do you have a...?"

She opened a cabinet door and steam drifted out. She handed him a warm, moist, cotton hand-towel.

"Oh no," he said, appalled. "I couldn't." He talked from the back of his throat, trying to hold back the sneeze.

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"This is part of the therapy, Edward. You must use the towel. No harsh paper." She smiled and touched the back of his wrist, prompting him to lift the towel to his face. He couldn't hold back any longer: he sneezed explosively. And again. And again.

Weakly he wiped the tip of his nose, his upper lip, and the delicate frenulum. He was ashamed, but the warm cloth felt wonderful.

Annit whisked it away from him and he leaned back into the table and closed his eyes. His nasal passages refilled like ballast tanks, but at least the sneezing fit was over.

Long moments later Annit lifted his ankles and set them onto a pillow. She oiled his feet, working the surface tissue with firm strokes. A groan of pleasure escaped him. She had a gift. She understood his body. She knew its hidden pockets of tension, and one by one she'd burst them all.

She seemed to change her grip, and he felt a sharp prick, obviously accomplished with a metal instrument. He tensed his body, but said nothing. She stabbed him again and he nearly yelped.

With some effort he lifted his head and looked down the landscape of his body. Annit's hands were empty. "What's that you're doing?" he asked. Trying to sound mildly curious.

"Reflexology," she said, and smiled. "The note from your wife said you wanted to try this."

"Oh." The voodoo thing. He let his head fall back against the table and thought, maybe she won't notice the toe.

With thumb and forefinger she held his right foot just below his ankle in a delicate grip that burned like sharpened forceps. He sucked air and waited for her to release.

"So," he said casually, his voice tight. "What points do those correspond to?"

"The penis and the prostate."

"Ah," he said, as if he'd guessed as much. She continued to hold the foot. My God, he thought, my balls are on fire. After a time she shifted to his other foot, and in the three-second gap between feet a chill coursed up his spine and he thought, hey, that's good.

"You have six toes on your left foot," she said. "That's wonderful."

The words made him flush. He knew he should make a joke, ask about correspondences, but was too embarrassed to speak. Margaret disliked the

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extra toe, barely acknowledged its existence. She only mentioned it in public once, obliquely, in the delivery room; she looked down at Michael's perfectly numbered digits and said, "Thank goodness he has my feet."

Annit worked the tips of his toes, the areas the *Cosmo* article had linked to sinuses. Her fingers were like needles but he began to anticipate the pain and move into it. Grunt for feedback.

Annit's voice drifted up from the other end of the table. "Do you trust me, Edward?"

Her finger punctured his small toe like a fondue fork.

"Ugh."

Time slipped away again. He thought about Annit's carbon-black eyes, her earnest, non-American voice: *The key to therapeutic sucsase is trust.* He should have told her about his daydream, about Joe Louis.

Grunt to give feedback.

Sometime later she moved to his face and massaged his cheekbones. "Urrm," he said, a little hesitantly. She hooked her fingers into the ridges above his eye sockets, three fingers to each socket, and pulled back. Bones creaked and he sighed. She pressed her palms to each temple and squeezed; he hissed. She wedged her thumbs against his nose and pushed east, south, west, north.

"Okay, Edward," Annit said, a little out of breath. "How are those sinuses?"

He tried to inhale through his nose: A wall. He tried to exhale and the air was forced out his mouth. "Still blocked," he said. Despair almost choked him. He could not move.

Annit cursed softly in another language. She touched his face and he closed his eyes again. "Trust me, Edward. Trust me. Lie here for a second."

Still blocked. Always. And the sins of the father would be passed on to the son. He could see the signs already. In the woods Michael's eyes would water. Dusty rooms made him sneeze like his old man. "Why couldn't he get my genes?" Margaret would say. It would have been better for the boy if he had. But a part of Edward felt...not proud, not satisfied...*validated* perhaps. Here was proof of lineage, distinctive as a hideous birthmark. There was something comforting in the fact that no matter how much their lives diverged — no matter if Michael grew up to

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be an astronaut or a drag queen — they would always share this. They would always have something to talk about.

The smell of incense was stronger. Edward opened one eye. Annit was lighting a candle on the floor a few feet beyond the table. Other candles were lit; little flames lined the walls.

"Isn't this a bit — " He swallowed. His mouth was dry. "A bit dangerous?"

Annit looked at him. Her face was painted in thick bands of yellow and red. It took him a moment to realize that she was also naked. She held up what looked like a celery stick. "Put this in your mouth," she said.

He opened his mouth and she wedged it in crosswise. He carefully touched it with his tongue; it tasted like bark. Annit stepped behind him. She began to chant in what sounded like B-movie American Indian: lots of vowels and grunts. Moments later her voice was joined by a loud moaning sound; when she danced into his peripheral vision he could see the stick on a rope whirling above her head. He'd seen that thing on the Discovery Channel. A...*bullroarer* — that was it. Remembering the name reassured him. He closed his eyes again.

The chanting and roaring went on for some time. It was soothing, actually, in the monotonous way that a chorus of washing machines made him sleepy in laundromats. Grunt for feedback, she'd said. Edward hummed along with the bullroarer.

There was a knock at the door. Annit's voice broke off and the bullroarer wound down until it clattered suddenly against the floor. He heard the chubby girl's voice, and Annit answering in a whisper, "I need more time."

"But his wife — "

"To hell with the wife. I've got a class-five chakra imbalance here." The door closed. There was the distinctive *clack* of a safety bolt sliding home.

He felt Annit's hand under his chin, and then she pulled the stick from his mouth.

He blinked up at her. "What was that you were doing?"

"Maori action dance. Very cleansing. Any luck?"

With an effort he brought his hand to his face and checked. Left nostril. Right nostril. Blocked as collapsed mine shafts. He sighed.

"Shit," Annit said. Edward let his head fall back against the mat. He

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listened to her move around the room, rustling papers and muttering. The ceiling was stucco, troweled on in overlapping circular grooves. Theoretically there should be a final circle that did not overlap any of the others, but he couldn't find it.

A sound like a window shade springing up. Edward turned his head. Annit was consulting a life-size chart of the human body that had unrolled from the ceiling. She cradled a heavy book in her left arm. "Okay," she said. The book dropped to the floor, loud as a cannon shot. The chart snapped upward. "Turn over again, Edward."

"I don't think this is going to help," he said, half to himself. He did as he was told. Annit removed the sheet completely and applied fresh oil, rubbing him deeply until he forgot his plugged nostrils and his mind began to slide sideways into the half-dreaming trance he'd attained earlier. She worked especially on his arms and legs, pressing her fingers deep into every joint from elbow to wrist, knee to ankle, and finished by wrapping each extremity in something thick and smooth. His limbs were numb. He drifted, dreaming, drowning happily. For a long time Annit didn't touch him, leaving him alone with the squeaks of ropes and pulleys. Edward imagined elephants from the circuses of old movies, lumbering beasts dragging poles into place, hauling on ropes to pull the tents erect. Out there in the desert, in the shadow of Ayers Rock, there was a special tent going up, the arena where he and Michael were kept as freaks. Bright posters screamed SEE! SIX-TOED SINUS MAN! AND! NASAL BOY! The crowd roared as the tattooed warriors attached block and tackle to their cage and hauled it up above the audience.

Annit touched his neck. "Not that dream, Edward," she said. "Not the false dream-time." He heard a loud crack and suddenly he was hanging in space. He opened his eyes and found himself swinging above the floor, the massage table on its side against the wall. Several still-lit candles rolled in arcs across the floor. He tried to scream but his position made it difficult to take in air.

Annit's voice was warm and commanding. "Edward. Edward."

He was splayed apart, macramé ropes at each limb suspending him from the metal planter hooks. Annit, still naked, caught his shoulders and stopped his swaying. She bent down and held his face in both hands. Her eyes were even with his. "So what's it going to be, Edward?"

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His arms were easing out of their sockets. His groin muscles were taut. "Huh?"

"Don't play stupid, Edward. What's it going to be? Back to your miserable world? Dripping and sneezing your way through life, never three feet away from a box of Kleenex?"

He shook his head, trying to assemble his thoughts. Far away, a pounding and the sound of Margaret's voice, calling to him.

Annit slapped him across one cheek, then gripped his jaw and tilted his face toward her. "Come on, Edward! Are you moving forward, or going back? What's it going to BE?"

His cheek burned. He could pull out now and walk into the lobby, shaking his head and thinking, *Crazy woman*. Margaret would run up to him, all expectant eyebrows: Still? His son would hand him a tissue.

Edward drew a breath. "Unngah."

Annit kissed him hard on the lips. "Okay, then." She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back like a child in a swing — slowly, slowly — then back-pedaled to catch him and shove again. He closed his eyes as she worked the rhythm, feeling his arc grow by degrees heavier and steeper, his speed becoming tremendous. At the top of the arc, sinus fluid pressed to the front of his skull. As he swooped down, lights crackled under his eyelids.

The pounding on the door deepened and stretched and buzzed, becoming the bass throb of the bullroarer.

"Edward!" Annit shouted, and he opened his eyes. He was at the zenith of his swing. The room was a fishbowl, walls curving out and back. Annit stood at the other end, naked except for her right arm, which was sheathed from elbow to fist in gleaming chrome. The gauntlet was medieval in design, covered with overlapping plates and studded with inch-long spikes, and seemed to end in too many fingers.

Annit stood waiting for him, legs apart and arm cocked, her eyes locked fiercely on his own.

She was braced for him. She could take him, if he trusted her.

He nodded — in agreement, in surrender, in benediction — and fell into her, swinging down, down, like two tons of metal.

Something furry brushed his cheek. He breathed deep, taking in a dense wave of unfamiliar scents, and opened his eyes.

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He lay on his stomach, arms and legs spread, sunk deep in the grasses of a sunlit field. He turned his head. The cat, a white Persian with blue eyes, rubbed its forehead along his brow, marking him with its scent glands. He stroked the cat's back and it arched into him, purring. A second cat butted against him, and a third, and a dozen more.

He got to his feet, careful not to tread on tails and paws. The prairie stretched for miles in all directions, a green ocean of Bermuda grass and Kentucky bluegrass and brilliant ragweed, swirling with rust and orange eddies of redtop and sagebrush. The plain stirred with the movements of furred animals: long-haired cats, thick-ruffed dogs, sleek-coated mammals he couldn't name.

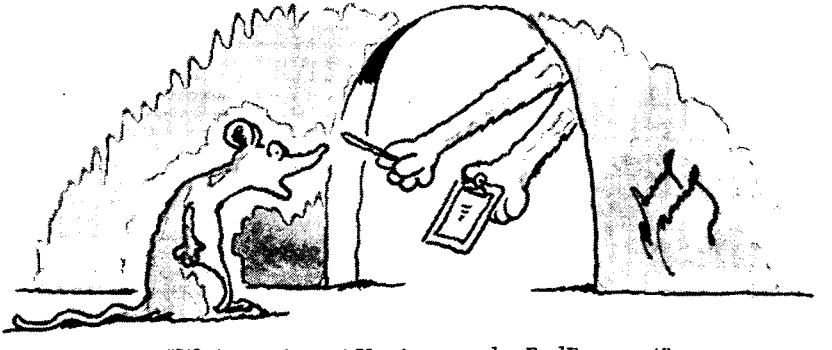
In the distance was a massive slump of naked rock, glowing pink in the sunlight. It was the flat-topped mountain he'd seen in his dream.

Annit walked to him through a stand of towering pigweed, her hair wild, her skin still vividly painted. Michael held her hand, talking excitedly, and when she gestured to Edward the boy shouted happily and ran to him. Edward scooped him up and swung him around. The boy's eyes were clear and dry. His nasal drip had disappeared.

Annit stood a small way off, smiling.

"Where are we?" Edward said.

A breeze touched his face and he inhaled deeply through wide-open nasal passages. The air was heavy with dense floral bouquets, earthy molds, and the pungent musk of thousands and thousands of cats.



"Wait a minute! You're not the FedEx man!"

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

LUCKING OUT

EVERY YEAR I say the same thing: This is the worst year yet for movies. The year 2003 is no exception. Here we are (at the time I write) in September and I can't think of a single studio picture that merits Oscar consideration...though I'm certain the Christmas season will bring a surfeit of contenders every bit the equal of the fabulous Richard Gere-Catherine Zeta-Jones vehicle that won last year's accolade, a musical extravaganza that set my toes to tap, tap, tapping and my stomach to upchuck, chucking. It has been an especially gruesome year for the English-language genre film, a year dominated by comic book adaptations that have ranged from the execrable *League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, which features Sean Connery's woefully inept Sean Connery impression, to the unrelentingly dimwitted *Daredevil*, which offers the latest proof of Ben Affleck's flat affect, and — a moderate high point — to the merely tolerable *X2*. The most palatable among the year's various horror films has been *28 Days Later*, a tarted-up British B-picture whose evocative *mise en scène* obscures to a degree its debt to George Romero's zombie movies and provides a particularly stirring first hour, but is nothing to shout about.

Then, of course, there are the Matrix sequels, for those who care to endure them.

The remainder of the year, with the possible exception of Peter Jackson's final chapter of Tolkien's Ring trilogy and *Gothika*, a supernatural thriller featuring an interesting cast and helmed by talented French director Mathieu Kassovitz, promises very little: werewolves versus vampires; macho Roman

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Catholic priests confronting supernatural terrors with crosses and prayers; the usual gaggle of haunted houses, assorted less-than-creepy CGI monsters, and sequels documenting the evisceration of attractive young sexually-active people. And in years to come we can look forward to cinematic treats that will doubtless embody all the intelligence and imagination that informs the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, a picture produced by that noted *auteur* Michael Bay, perpetrator of the twin horrors *Pearl Harbor* and *Armageddon*, who tells us with full-on sanctimony that his version of *Chainsaw* will not have any of the gore that made the original so yucky.

As you may recall, Tobe Hooper's version, while disturbing, contained nary a drop of gore.

While Hollywood continues unabashed and unabated on its dumb and dumber course, filmmakers in various other countries are busy developing a strong genre tradition. Korea, Thailand, and Japan spring immediately to mind in this regard. As does Spain. It could be argued that in recent years, led by directors such as Guillermo del Toro *(The Devil's Backbone)*, Alejandro Amenábar *(Open Your Eyes)*, and Jaume Balagueró *(Los Sin Nombre)*, an adaptation of Ramsey Campbell's *The Nameless*), Spain has produced the most interesting and well-crafted thrillers of any nation in Europe, movies that confront complicated philosophical questions as well as generating suspense. To that list must now be added the name of first-time director Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, whose film *Intacto* is the most original thriller of recent vintage made in any country or language, a stylish mixture of magical realism and hardboiled mystery that might have been co-authored by Jorge Luis Borges and James M. Cain.

The idea underlying *Intacto* is that luck is not a result that reflects the operation of chance, but rather is itself a force, an energy, that resides in every man, woman, and child to one degree or another. This force is so tangible a thing, it can be stolen by a certain people, who themselves constitute an underworld — indeed, a sub-culture — of gamblers whose games are somewhat untraditional. Luck for them is the coin they wager as they compete against one another for the ultimate prize: the opportunity to engage in a duel to the death with Samuel Berg, known as "The Jew," a Nazi death camp survivor who is the self-proclaimed luckiest man alive — essentially, the god of luck.

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Berg, played with immense gravitas by Max von Sydow, resides in a bunkerlike apartment beneath his casino, which is situated amid a lava flow somewhere in the Canary Islands, a lunar landscape that echoes the bleakness of the gamblers' lives. Their ability to steal luck, you see, is both a gift and an affliction, for in times of great peril they — inadvertently or otherwise — steal the luck of those around them and thus cause their deaths.

The movie opens with Berg sitting in his apartment, his head covered by a black cloth, waiting for a man who has won the right to challenge him. When the man enters, he's given a handgun that holds five bullets and one empty chamber. He aims at Berg's head and fires. Click. The cylinder is spun, the gun is handed to Berg. He fires and the man falls dead. The corpse is then wrapped in a plastic sheet and removed. Thus end all challenges to Berg, but he derives no great pleasure from victory. Indeed, he seems to yearn for death. Over the years, the cost attendant upon the gift that allowed him to survive the Nazis has caused him to rethink the advisability of remaining alive.

The chief duty of Berg's protégé and assistant, Federico (Eusebio Poncela), is to steal the luck of big winners at the casino's tables — this he accomplishes merely by touching them. It's a pretty soft sinecure, but Federico wants to go out on his own, and when Berg discovers this, he seizes Federico's wrist and steals his luck. The film jumps ahead seven years and we discover that Federico has become a sort of talent scout, seeking out gifted players for the underground gambling circuit. In his search, he stumbles across Tomás (Leonardo Sbaraglia), a man whom he believes may become the instrument of his vengeance against Berg. Tomás is the sole survivor of a plane crash in which more than two hundred people died. He is also a bank robber. When we first see him, sitting in the wreckage of the plane, he has dozens of packets of currency taped to his torso. On waking in his hospital room, he finds a police detective, Sara (Mónica López), waiting to arrest him. Sara is herself blessed/cursed with the ability to steal luck and is scarred both physically and emotionally as a result of a car wreck that she survived by draining the luck of her husband and child during the moment of impact. (Plotwise, her appearance may seem a bit pat, but Fresnadillo, employing a darkly eloquent visual style and an elliptical narration reminiscent

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of his countryman, Amenábar, manages to obscure such tactics of convenience.) Federico helps Tomás escape Sara's clutches and thereafter begins to school him in the game, honing his weapon against Berg by entering him in competition after competition against other gifted luck-thieves. As with M. Night Shamalyan's *Unbreakable*, a film with which it shares more than thematic content, *Intacto* concerns itself on one level with survivor guilt. Sara's pursuit of Tomás and Federico not only serves to create suspense, but also generates an atmosphere of griefstricken obsession that seems to cling to all the gamblers. Of their number, only Alejandro (Antonio Dechent), a matador who no longer finds the bull ring a challenge, plays for the thrill. The rest appear motivated, to one degree or another, by the desire to rejoin those whom they have survived, and view their survival as less a product of good fortune than as a cosmic joke. Luck has corrupted them, poisoned their souls, and, like Berg, their icon, though they may not yet be prepared to die, they have forgotten how to live.

If it's Sara's compulsiveness that infuses *Intacto* with its noirish moodiness and grit, it's the games themselves that provide the picture's exotic element. The first competition that Tomás enters involves having his hair brushed with water that has been steeped in molasses, then placed in a room with two other players and a large molasses-loving praying mantis. The lights are switched off and the mantis flies about the room, eventually settling on the head of the winner. In the film's best set piece, a number of contestants are blindfolded and then induced to run full-out through a dense forest, the winner being the one who does not head-on into a tree. Each contest is played for high stakes — luxurious houses and so forth — but of course the true purpose of all the competitions is to winnow the competitors down to one who will challenge Berg for the highest stakes of all in his amped-up version of Russian Roulette.

For all its virtues, *Intacto* may prove ultimately disappointing to those viewers accustomed to the more hyper-emotive narrative style of Hollywood movies; but since the remake rights have been snapped up, it's likely that they will soon be able to see the story done in an overblown, multiplex-friendly manner, with Brad Pitt, perhaps, as Tomás and Berg played by the

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increasingly somnolent Anthony Hopkins. As it is, the ultra-sleek visuals and the single-mindedness of *Intacto*'s characters combine to enforce an overarching mood of detachment. Fresnadillo, it seems, does not want us to connect with his characters so much as to understand their detachment, to feel their separation from the human herd, and so he seeks to engender a certain detachment in his audience. A middle ground allowing for some slight empathetic audience reaction — using Sara's tragedy, say, to affect us emotionally — might have broadened the film's appeal. And yet, being so detached, the viewer is enabled to better appreciate the perversity and cruelty of the milieu Fresnadillo is presenting, and, by association, to recognize that perversity and cruelty is the ocean in which most of us swim, protected from its zero temperature only by a thin clothing of illusion and luck.

I've spent a good bit of verbiage in this and previous columns ranking on Hollywood — as time-wasting a pursuit as lecturing a gerbil on table manners. Yet whenever I see a movie like *Intacto*, I'm always amazed that we didn't make it first, that we haven't mined the story-rich environments of our own casino landscape and come up with films that bear a stamp of originality, rather than churning out a sludge of caper flicks. Not long ago, there were far more American films remade by foreign production companies than the reverse. Now that trend has turned around, and it's Spain, France, Korea, et al, who are leading the way. Greed and stupidity have fostered this lack of adventurousness — that's not hard to understand. But it's harder to understand why those who direct and produce American remakes of foreign films tend to scrub away the qualities that made them attractive to the studios in the first place. It's as if they're kids who've planned a really cool trick, grown afraid nobody will get it, and so they explain it to everyone in advance, thus spoiling the effect. Usually when I see a movie that provokes such thoughts, I don't dwell on the subject. However, *Intacto* seems such an American story, so American in its compulsions (though given a Spanish accent), and there have been so many foreign movies recently that play like American movies overdubbed in a foreign language (*Open Your Eyes, City of God, Amores Perros*, et al), I began to wonder if creativity, like luck, might not be a tangible force, and rather than having

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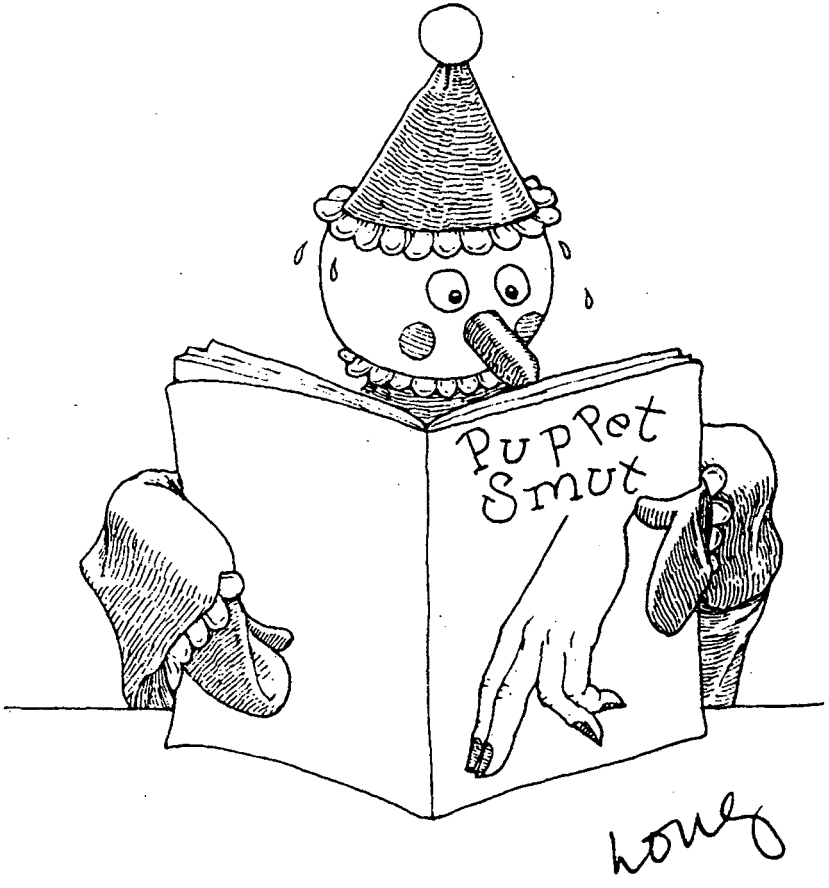
it stolen from us, we were yielding it up, just letting it waft away, infecting the world not only with the worst of our culture, but also the best of it, and as a result our country was becoming the true cultural victim, growing gray and inert and sparkless.... Throw in a plotline and you might be able to transform that notion into a decent movie.

Maybe some Spanish director will make it.



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Here we have a fantasy most Gothic from a new writer — this story marks her first publication, and she offers these biographical notes (which set the stage for her story as well as anything might): "After her birth, Y.S. Wilce began to grow until she reached 5 feet 1. Finding the view from this height to be adequate, she then stopped, and has remained thus ever since. As a moppet, she suffered awfully from an overactive imagination and the doctors despaired of her health — indeed, it is a wonder she has lived. Educated both at home and abroad, she has never allowed school to interfere with her education and she advises you to do the same. Since reaching her majority, she has been a historian and a fabulist, sometimes on the same page." She notes also that her Website is at www.yswilce.com.

Metal More Attractive

By Ysabeau S. Wilce

Queen. Come hither, my dear Hamlet, and sit by me.
Hamlet. No good mother, here's metal more attractive.
—Hamlet
Act III, Scene II

I.

SO, HERE WE HAVE Hardhands in a bar. It's not exactly entirely a bar, but then he's not exactly entirely Hard–hands either, at least not yet. At this moment, he's only fifteen years old and his hands are still white and tender, so too is his conscience. Both hands and head are soon to get much tougher, but right now he's still rather sweet.

Ice cream is the joint yummy, not bugjuice, but to the back of the room, there is a bar-like counter, thus a bar in spirit if not in name. Having strode through the swinging curtain of beads which hides the door,

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forward to this bar-like counter sails young Hardhands for to get the barkeep's attention. The clientele at Guerrero's Helados y Refrescos is thick both in person and in odor, so Hardhands must push and breathe lightly, but he's not to be stopped once he's started. Eventually he reaches his objective, which is well scarred from digging spoons and sliding glasses.

Achieving his goal, Hardhands-Who-Will-Be leans on the bar, very cool-like, and he says to the barkeep, very cool-like: "Have you seen Jack?" He has to shout because there's a tin-pan band playing in a darkened corner, off-key and whinier than love, and this shouting somewhat scotches his suave effect.

The barkeep can hear Hardhands, but she has not seen Jack. Nor has she seen Hardhands's money, or heard his order, so she pays no never mind to his question, but, rather, spits in the glass she holds, and rubs around the rim with a towel. Thus clean, or at least cleanish, the glass is hung on the rack above and the barkeep spits into an entirely new dirty glass. There's an identical woman hanging on the wall behind her, doing the identical same thing, only somehow that woman seems a bit nicer, as though she'd probably answer Hardhands's question, but facing away, as she is, she doesn't even notice him, so there's no help there. Even staring at his own splendid reflection, he's pretty much on his own.

Someone falls off the balcony with a crash and the barkeep flicks her towel. An egregore built like canister shot, with tusks the size of plantanos and floppy basset ears, rumbles out of the darkness and hefts the splattered form outward. Too much sugar, not enough catch.

Hardhands glares, a fifteen-year-old glare that has the entire force of being the only grandson of the Pontifexa of Califa behind it. Spit, rub, spit, rub is what he gets for his efforts, and his more urgent repeat of the question, which is really now a demand, gets rub, spit, rub, spit. The drover at the other end of the bar warbles drunkenly for another Choronzon's Delight, heavy on the caramel whip, and the barkeep abandons her spitting and rubbing to bob to his bidding. She's not deaf at all, the tin pan band is not that loud; she just doesn't like uppity young men who stride into her bar and plunk down attitude instead of cash.

The dangling mirror has suddenly gotten more interesting, and Hardhands is a tad distracted. He came to the most notorious helado joint in the City to try to hire the most notorious plunger in the City to do a dirty

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deed at a cut-rate price, but he's now mesmerized by the slinky entity in the slinky silk ribands now slinking before the band. It's not the slinking itself that enthralls, no, it's just that the slinkster seems to have tentacles instead of arms, boneless and tendril-like they wiggle and wave. Its head is rather pointy, and its eyes rather low set and round, squid-like, its skin glittering like coldfire in the cigarillo smoky darkness — a water elemental way out of its element.

"I've seen Jack."

Hardhands turns sideways, away from the loligo gyrating before him in the mirror, thus behind him by the band. The muleskinner probably hasn't had a bath since the midwife dipped his squalling infant-self in milk minutes after he was born, and his face is a beach of rippling wrinkles, but his little marble eyes are quite alert. He's been sloshing the complimentary bread into the complimentary olive oil, and he's left little oily dribbles on the bar top and squishy black finger marks on the bread. Handhands is pretty darn glad he's already had nuncheon with his beloved grandmamma, whom he is going to hire Springheel Jack to kill.

"But just 'cause I've seen Jack," continues the muleskinner, "Don't mean that Jack wants to see you."

"I daresay he'll want to see my money," says Hardhands loftily.

"My throat wouldn't mind seeing your divas." The muleskinner nudges his parfait glass. Whipped cream is just a memorable smear around the top edge of the glass, and there is a little tiny smudge of melted ice-cream in the bottom. Another suck on the straw and the glass will be dry, oh dear.

Handhands is stuck now. It's gold or information. He digs reluctantly into his purse, which practically squeals when he pries it open, and fancy that, the barkeep has suddenly found her ears, and with them her hearing.

"You want?" she asks, sliding back, looking lively. She's abandoned two miners fresh in from the fields, gold dust flecking their eyelashes and hair, blisters raw on their hands, who are playing a friendly game of mumbly-peg as they sip their sodas at the far end of the bar.

"Pink Lady Parfait," says the muleskinner, who'd been drinking something cheaper before, but the Pontifexa's grandson can hardly expect to fandango into a bar, even one that doesn't serve booze, and not pay for what he gets, and pay well, too.

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The preparation of the Pink Lady Parfait is temporarily halted by a dust-up. The mumbly-peg knife has slipped and one of the miners is now very friendly with the wooden bar top. She wrenches her hand free with a whistle of pain, and cracks foreheads with her friend. For a moment things look pretty rough and Hardhands wishes he had not worn white. But when the barkeep raps her blackjack down on the counter, the reverberating whackety-whack noise is enough to make the pugilists reconsider their fun. They sheepishly thump fists together in apology and go back to digging for the cherries in their Cheery Cherry Freezie-Slurps. The music continues to whine, but the loligo elemental has slithered off.

"So, Jack," says Hardhands, who has now patiently sat through the stirring and shaking of the Pink Lady Parfait, the dipping of the spoon, the slurping of the straw, the chewing of the soggy caramel corn that always sinks to the bottom of the glass. Lacking the requisite teeth, this last action really qualifies as gumming, not chewing, but the old muleskinner gets the job done, and then he's feeling pretty darn frisky. Not frisky enough to actually give Springheel Jack's location up to this uppity young pup who just swirled in like he owns the place (which technically he does, well, at least his grandmamma does, as she owns every square inch of the City), all champagne shiny boots and gleaming bone-white hair, expensive as hell. But frisky enough to continue to pretend that he knows where Springheel Jack is, even though he has hell-all of a clew.

"Sew buttons," says the muleskinner. His straw slurps air with a forlorn rasp. The barkeep is ready with another Pink Lady; she knows this game by heart, string along the sucker until his money runs out. She knows exactly who Hardhands is, of course — Banastre Micajah Haðraaða, Duke of Califa — but she's a Radical Chaoist and likes to skate on political thin ice, so she plunks the Pink Lady down and gives Hardhands a bit of a smarmy grin. Hardhands returns the smarmy grin with an ice blue stare, a thin cold look that suddenly reminds the barkeep that the Pontifexa's grandson is both quick on the trigger and pretty much above the law. She's used to the first, she and her bulletproof bouncer can handle that just fine, but that second — she sidles back to the miners. The muleskinner is on his own.

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II.

SO, HERE WE HAVE Hardhands at home, if you can call a four-hundred-room monstrosity, all soaring blue minarets and towering arches, fifty bathrooms with fifty ice cold floors, home, which he does, quite happily. Bilskinir House, looking out over a lazy ocean, its back to the City and thus to the known world.

Hardhands leaves his horse carelessly cropping daisies on the front lawn, vaults front steps, and races into the Entrada, the bang of the door behind him, thunderously. He tears by Paimon, in a rush, in a hurry, in a snit the size of the deep blue sea, scattering the Butler's brushes and leaving elegantly smeared boot tracks on the Butler's foamy white floor. His braids are crackling with annoyance, his sack coat flaps like the wings of an irritated bird, he's pissed because he bought that muleskinner five Pink Lady Parfaits and two plates of jamón y guava sandwies and all he got for his philanthropy was the sobbed story of the death of Evil Murdoch, a mule who had been the very epitome of mules, the beauty of the world and a fantastic spitter with teeth the size of dinner plates. The story had been sad, all right — flippy ears, shifting earth, skittering hooves and a long long fall to a very large splat — but Hardhands is interested not in dead mules, but in living outlaws, and soon-to-be-dead grandmammas, and he had sat through the woeful tale impatient and annoyed. Afterward, he and the bereft muleskinner had strolled to the cruddy sinks at the back of the bar, where strenuous exercise (on Hardhands's part) then elicited from the weepy skinner the admission that he had only once seen Springheel Jack at a distance, in a bagnio long ago closed, and never again.

Now Hardhands is late, and he's in a fury because he's late, and his visit South of the Slot has been for naught, and he's down twenty-seven divas in gold, and the muleskinner has gotten strawberry syrup and blood on his new white sack coat. Also, because if he doesn't find Springheel Jack, he's going to have to kill his grandmamma himself. He's fond of the old girl, and would rather not, really, but she has given him no choice. Regretful, but true.

He races up the wide marble steps, two by two, and happily they are already dry, not that he cares, as washing them is someone else's job,

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someone else's knees. A sheaf of staff officers are descending downward, the Pontifexa's afternoon briefing is done, and they are laden down with redboxes, round files, lapdesks, and dispatch cases. Hardhands tears through the yaller dogs, sending skirts and lovelocks flying, barking at them mockingly. The officers, wary of Hardhands's stunningly perfect aim and hair-trigger temper, do not dare yip back, but continue down the stairs, mumbling derisively under their breaths.

It is sixteen hundred and Hardhands is supposed to be at the Blue Duck by seventeen for sound check, yet he still needs to bathe, to change, to redo his hair, to kiss his grandmamma good evening. Cursing the muleskinner, he storms up the second flight of stairs and down the narrow hallway, his urgent shadow rippling off glass cases, the woven roses beneath his feet muffling his tread. In his bedroom, he chucks his hat on the red velvet bolster, disturbing the cat curled in a circle on his pillow. He flings his shoulder holster on the dresser and hops out of his skirts, into his dressing gown. The cat has awakened, irritated at the noise, and is now scratching at a carved pineapple on the four-hundred-year-old bed. Hardhands was born in that bed, fifteen years before, but if he continues down his path, he certainly will not die there.

"Paimon!" he hollers, ceilingward. "I need you to arrange my hair!"

Back down the hall he goes, not quite as fast, unfastening his braids, snarling the skeins of ivory hair with clawing fingers. He's thinking hard, young Hardhands is. If not Springheel Jack, then who? He once had to shoot a horse that broke its neck trying to jump a cow, but that's not the same as killing a sweet little grandmamma with imperious red hair and a darling pink smile. Can he do it? Can he not?

At the bathroom door, above the happy noise of blessed hot water, Hardhands's consideration is arrested by a piping voice, a wispy little lisp, the high-pitched sound of doom, of gloom, of bloody destiny, of horrific fate, of —

"Bwaaaan!" He turns reluctantly, and a fat little whiteness is hurtling through the air upon him, all bubbling curls and floaty lace. He catches, awkwardly, a fat little chin hitting his own square chin, a bare white foot connecting hard with his kidneys.

"You should be in bed," he says, gritting through fifty fathoms of thundering pain.

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"Baftime is funtime," says his Little Tiny Doom. Little Tiny Doom smells like milk and toast, is somewhat grubby, and Hardhands will be damned if he will marry her, not a wit of it. Not a jot, not a tittle, not at all. Period. Finale. Punto. That's it. The End.

"Quack quack!" adds Little Tiny Doom, in case Hardhands has missed her point.

Hardhands has been on this boat before, and he's eager to get off before he gets soaked. Bathtime is not funtime when it involves red rubber ducks, slippery soap, and shampoo wigs. He doesn't have time for this; the band will be waiting for him, the show is sold right out, and he still has to evoke a drummer to replace their previous percussion dæmon which spontaneously combusted during The Tygers of Wrath's last gig. He tries to disengage from Little Tiny Doom, but Little Tiny Doom has arms of steel and toes of clinginess and she will not let go of him.

Little Tiny Doom, that is to say, Cyrenacia Sidonia Haðraaða ov Brakespeare, as she is known on the official documents she is too young to sign, adores Hardhands. She loves his height, his splendid glittering clothes, and his splendid shining hair which reminds her of the flossy white candy she gets when she goes to Woodward's Gardens to ride on the Circular Boat. One fat little hand grabs a wad of braid and into her mouth it goes, to see if the shiny white floss tastes good, which thanks to judicious use of bay rum hair oil, it does not.

"Paimon!" Hardhands hollers, and there Paimon is, bearing warm towels and his favorite hairbrush, the one with the badger bristles and the gold loligo crest.

"Sieur Duke?"

"She's eating my hair." A Duke should not sound so whiny. Authority is equal parts arrogance and confidence, which Hardhands knows full well, but has forgotten in his trauma of being cannibalized by a three-year-old.

"Madama," Paimon says, in his dark blue voice. Cyrenacia knows this tone, it is the tone of bed without story, of bread without milk, of bath without duck, and she spits and smiles sweetly in the Butler's direction. She's three years old but she's no fool.

"I'm in a hurry, take her and get her clean or whatever you are going to do with her, and hurry about it because I need you to do my hair. I want

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a chignon tonight and I haven't got much time — ooff." This ooof has naught to do with time and everything to do grabby hands and dangling gold ear hoops. "Stop it!"

"Bwaaanie — " says Cyrenacia, so cutely. She is a darling child even if she does have only a few wispy curls and a tendency to burp loudly at the dinner table. Her lisping version of Hardhands's name is just darling, too, but darlingness is wasted on Hardhands who feels it has no place in his carefully cultivated dark mysterious image. Ban, as he is called by his grandmamma, his leman, and the cheap yellow press, is tolerable, but Bannie is beyond the limit.

"Take her — !" Disengaged, and outthrust, Tiny Doom dangles toward Paimon. Her mouth is starting to squeeze together in a little pink pout. The pout is a prelude to howls and the howls a prelude to a furious grandmamma and then they shall all be in that boat, only it will now be sinking and, battered by Grandmamma's ire, they will have forgotten how to swim.

"Sieur — "

The howl is as high pitched as the whistle of steam from a kettle and as hot. Hardhands freezes. He's manifested a Tunnel of Set in his bedroom, he's jumped off Battery Sligo into the boiling sea one hundred feet below, and once he set his hair on fire for a triple dog dare, but now he's stuck like glue. His nerve is being yanked out of his body by the thread of that ghastly sound, and if there were a well nearby, he'd drop Tiny Doom into it and slam the lid shut. Alas, no well, only a brimming bath, toward which, in a burst of desperate creativity, Hardhands now turns, but before he can drown the child, Paimon retrieves her from his panicked grasp.

Tap-tap-tap-tap echoes down the stairs like gunshots, the Pontifexa rat-tat-tatting to her great-granddaughter's rescue on high red heels of fire, feathers flying off her wrapper in her rush. She is trailed by seven anxious dogs who are braying in sympathy, and she, too, is now snapping with anger that her afternoon massage has been interrupted.

"What are you doing to that child, Banastre Haðraaða?" she demands. "You there, sush!" That to the howling dogs, who do sush, for the Pontifexa speaks and is obeyed.

"She was eating my hair!"

"Pah! Why did you let her? Stop that caterwauling, my dove, you are giving Grandmamma a headache, and Grandmamma already has enough

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of a headache, she needs no more." This is said with a suitable guilt-making glance at Hardhands, which guilt it does not induce because he is not going to marry a squalling three-year-old — end of discussion, let us not speak on it again.

Grandmamma's Dove has made her point, and now turns all smiles and sweetness, enough to melt heart, if not hands, of stone. Paimon peels her nightgown and plunks her in the soapy water, twisting bubbles into a crown, and bobbing her red devil duck on a tidal wave of foam.

The Pontifexa beams at her sweet wet little heir. "You were never so cute when you were that age, Banastre."

"Ha! I had more hair and I was never so fat."

"So you say, but I know better." The Pontifexa links one rounded white arm through Hardhands's own sinewy forearm, and together they leave the sloshy bathroom, the mirrors now refracting the pink bobbing child and the blue scrubbing butler.

The Pontifexa and Hardhands have already had the Fight, with the screaming and the cursing and the dire threats: incarceration, exile, defenestration, decapitation. They've had the Pleading, the Urgings of Duty, of Honor, of Sacred Trust, of Love & Debt. They've had the *I Ask So Little of You You Ask the One Thing I Cannot Give.* Now they are having the *I am Ignoring You You Will Do What I Want Anyway Because I Said So Damn Your Eyes If I Will We'll See Who Is Boss.*

Rub two Haðraaða Wills together and you'll get, well, you'll get nothing at all, cancellation, void, null, stalemate. But the clock is ticking: they've got three days to make up their minds whose Will is to prevail: in three days Julien Brakespeare, Tiny Doom's daddy, is leaving Califa. As Tiny Doom's father he has the right to remove her with him — a nasty court battle has settled that question — and the thought of Julien Brakespeare in final possession of her heir sends the color soaring in the Pontifexa's normally pale face. She is determined that Hardhands's rights as Cyrenacia's husband will prevail over the rights of Cyrenacia's father. The rights of Cyrenacia's mother, she who would have been Georgiana IV, are null and void, for Sidonia Haðraaða ov Brakespeare is six months dead. Died in childbed is the official explanation, but the Pontifexa believes that not at all. Julien killed her granddaughter, she is sure of it, but there's no proof.

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"Are you still sulking, Banastre?" the Pontifexa demands, stopping in front of Hardhands's bedroom.

"No," he says, although of course, he is. He's trying harder not to show it now, though. No point in putting the Pontifexa further up. He's pretending to give in to get exactly what he wants.

"Sulk all you want now, but I expect to see you smile on your wedding day," the Pontifexa says. She is small, but she has incredibly sharp teeth. This wedding day is scheduled for two days hence; dangerously close to the date upon which the Pontifexa must hand her heir over to Julien, but the delay cannot be helped. The Pontifexa, with much consultation with Paimon, has pored over the Almanack to ensure that the wedding occurs on a day in which all the aspects, portents, and sigils align auspiciously and the Magickal Current is high. This delay has caused the Pontifexa no end of knuckle-cracking but has been quite useful for young Ban.

The Pontifexa follows her grandson into his bedroom and begins to fiddle with his hair. She has clever fingers, the Pontifexa does, and soon Hardhands's wayward locks are smoothed and twisted, secured with a wide silver comb. This dressing comes not without its price, and Hardhands's reflection in the mirror is, despite his best efforts, somewhat scowly. The Pontifexa is serene and deft.

"I am sorry, my darling, that I cannot let you do as you will in this matter," she says.

"Um," says Hardhands, for he's already said everything else.

"We can't let Julien Brakespeare have Cyrenacia."

"Why not?"

"Ha!" says the Pontifexa, an explosive *ha* that has a myriad of meanings in it, none of them good. "He's already ruined one of my heirs; I'll not have him ruin the other. Had he not induced your sister to throw over her duty to her City and run off with him, she should be safe within our House still, and the stability of our City not in doubt. He's a crawling serpentine fancy man, and goddess knows what he'll do to her if he keeps her."

She puts the last hair pin in Hardhands's chignon and places narrow hands on his wide shoulders. Their reflections stare back at them, one sullen, the other a tad bit sad. She slides feathered arms around her grandson's broad paisley shoulders and says, in a softer voice: "Don't

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think, my baby, that I don't know what I am asking you give up. It is a lot to suddenly ask, when I've asked nothing before."

So she says, and she is right. Until six months ago, Hardhands was nothing but his grandmother's darling boy, who could do whatever he wanted and who no one dared gainsay. Now suddenly he is the hope of the Haðraaða line and he wants none of it. Hardhands cannot hold the Steel Fan that is the scepter of the City, for that honor is passed only through female blood, but he can protect the Heir Apparent — which means marrying her so that, during her minority, her father can have no claim of influence over her. Hardhands does not want to marry Little Tiny Doom. He has other plans, in which a dynastic marriage does not figure. He has other loves, too.

However. For the moment. Hardhands wipes the scowl off his face, and turns about, to pull his sweet little grandmamma, the only parent he has ever known, onto his lap. He kisses her white forehead and says: "I bow to your Will, madama. In this as in all things."

The Pontifexa smiles, "You are my darling boy."

"I am," Hardhands agrees, and they embrace. His grandmamma's hair smells citrusy smooth, like orange blossoms, and this fragrance remembers him when he fit in her lap rather than the other way around. Sometimes he is a wee sad those days are gone. For a moment he wavers, and then he sternly straightens himself up. He has no choice. Him or her.

The Pontifexa removes herself from Hardhands's lap and clicks to the door. There she pauses, and turns back, patting her mussed coils of sunset colored hair back into place. Hardhands is leaning over his dressing table striping a thin line of black paint along his eyelid when she speaks again:

"How is the helado at Guerrero's these days?"

His hand jerks and he almost puts his eye out with the eyeliner brush. He looks beyond his reflection, to his grandmother's serene steely blue gaze. Paimon has apparently finished with Tiny Doom because he now stands behind his mistress, an enormous blue shadow that seems to darken the room. The Pontifexa is still smiling, but that is not necessarily a Good Thing.

"Yummy, as usual," he says, pleased that his voice does not even quiver.

"With the wedding so near, and Julien still in town, darling, I think

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it best not to take chances in such a questionable neighborhood. Perhaps I should ask Godelieve to detail you a guard." The Pontifexa is very subtle, but our boy gets her drift.

"I go armed," he says. "And anyway, Julien has no reason to challenge you now. He knows that he has won."

"Still, there is always the possibility that he could learn of our plans, darling, and in desperation, take desperate measures. Don't underestimate him."

Hardhands smiles his most boyish carefree smile, "Never mind Julien. He'll never know what hit him. And it would look very odd if suddenly I was bristling with armed lackeys everywhere I went. We don't want to put his nose up, do we?"

"Of course, you are right, Banastre, but still, I cannot rest until the baby is safe. I do so worry. You will be careful, no? I have borne all the loss I can." The Pontifexa's expression, however, belies her words. He's being warned and he knows it. But a warning will not change his mind.

"Of course, Grandmamma."

"Thank you, sweetness — yes, Paimon, I can hear you breathing down my neck. What do you want?"

Paimon says, in his gentle rolling voice, "Madama Brakespeare is in bed, awaiting her goodnight story."

"Thank you, Paimon. I shall come. Have a wonderful show, Banastre. I will see you in the morning at breakfast." The Pontifexa sends a kiss winging its way through the air, which her grandson does not try to catch. She closes the door gently behind her. Hardhands grimaces at his own reflection and goes back to his toilette.

When Hardhands finally gets to the Blue Duck, his resolve is stuck as tightly to his Will as a whore sticks to cash. Forget Springheel Jack. Hardhands has thought of metal more attractive. He has remembered in his readings, always eclectic, a receipt for a topical poison. Made from a variety of esoteric ingredients, this poison is fast and furious when it touches the skin, and it leaves not even the tiniest trace, death seeming wholly natural, although a bit surprising. Along with the receipt for the poison is receipt for an antidote that will allow the poisoner to infect without being infected. Hardhands may not be able to stab his grandmamma, drown her in her bath, shoot her in the head, or crack her

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soft white neck with his soft white hands, but he has full confidence he can kiss her, having done so a thousand times before.

III.

SO, HERE WE HAVE Hardhands in the Magick Box. Today he has an entourage suitable to his exalted state: there's Hardhands's leman, lips somewhat compressed, and Hardhands's two hounds, gray as sea salt, and, annoyingly, Hardhands's Little Tiny Doom, along because the Pontifexa has court cases to sit in on and Paimon is making teaberry jam and does not want sticky fingers messing with his sugar. Since she has dressed herself with minimal adult supervision, Cyrenacia is the flashiest of the trio: pink velvet dress, scuffed cowboy boots, and one of the Pontifexa's discarded weasel tippets. Hardhands is in a good enough mood to admit that she does look rather doll.

He is in a good mood because the Tygers of Wrath's gig the previous night had been incredible, fantastic, amazing, their Best Show Ever. The band had practically engulfed the Blue Duck in an inferno of explosive rhythm. The Siege of San Quentin was not as cataclysmically loud. Hardhands's evocation was spot-on, terrific, sharp as a scalpel, and the percussion dæmon that had ensued had been an egregore of at least the sixth level, as tall as a horsecar, wide as a street. Such a noise had rolled out of its enormous mouth that the avid ears closest to its maw would probably be bleeding for the next week. If the Blue Duck had had any windows, surely they would have shattered. If the Blue Duck had had a roof, surely it would have been raised. Ah, what a show. Even being ordered to babysit Little Tiny Doom cannot spoil the afterglow.

The Magick Box is all darkness and boo-spooky atmosphere, with the usual boo-spooky magickal type stuff hanging on the walls: dried bats, twisted galangal root, black candles, etc. The stuff of which clichés are made, and Hardhands is not interested in clichés, only in pure hard magick, the stuff of Concentration, of Focus, of Absolute Pinpointed Will. He's spent years working on his Art, and by now it's pretty Artful, so he requires not the silly props. He doesn't need dried bats or twisted galangal or black candles, and so he strides by these objects to what he does need,

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which is kept locked behind the counter, away from amateurs, novices, and greenhorns. The Good Stuff. Expensive and Dangerous as a riptide.

There's a servitor behind the counter, an egregore so advanced that it looks just like a woman. Her eyes are a bit flat and her hair has a rather vivid grassy sheen to it, but otherwise you'd pass her on the street and not even notice. Most servitors never get this advanced, too dangerous to give them such power, but the owner of the Magick Box is perfectly in control of all her sigils and she's more fond of windsurfing than of standing behind a counter selling chicken's feet to Adept-Want-To-Bes, thus this incredibly detailed autonomous servitor doing the dirty work for her.

"Do not touch the Hands of Glory," says the Egregore. She is talking to Tiny Doom, not to Hardhands, of course.

"Cyrenacia!" barks her uncle. Cyrenacia is barked at so infrequently that she is immune to the bite, but she is bored with the nasty-smelling wax thing anyway, so she quits fiddling. "Keep an eye on her, Relais."

Relais vaguely makes motion toward the child, but his heart's not in it, and she knows it. Cyrenacia disappears around a bookcase and Relais lets her go. He's hung over from the night before and he is worried that his eyes are looking puffy and red, so he has not the interest in small annoying girls.

Hardhands and the Egregore have a brief consultation. He knows what he wants and she gives it to him, measuring strange smells and stranger colors into little twists of paper, small smoked glass jars and, in one case, a pearly vial that is sealed tight with a tiny but powerful sigil.

Jingle-jangle at the door, and though Hardhands does not turn around, he does not need to turn around, he can tell from the sound of the footfalls, from the scent of the cologne, from the burn in the bottom of his belly exactly who has just walked in.

"A pound of bear grease," Hardhands says calmly. He is not his grandmamma's beloved grandson for naught.

"Black bear or cinnamon bear?" asks the Egregore.

"White," says Hardhands.

The Egregore looks at Hardhands. Grease from an albino bear is rare and as volatile as a fifteen-year-old boy, which the Egregore has suddenly remembered Hardhands is. For all his concentrated Will, he is not an Adept. But he is the Pontifexa's grandson.

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The Egregore hesitates.

"Well, have you not got it?" Hardhands asks impatiently.

The Egregore decides. "Ayah, I have it so, but it is locked. I must dish out, wait here."

The Egregore disappears into the darkness at the back of the store. Hardhands then realizes voices behind him, a tiny lisping voice and a lighter adult voice, engaged in conversation regarding the sweetness of little puppies.

He jerks around, but the voices are hidden by a bookshelf, which he fair vaults around because he had totally forgotten Little Tiny Doom, and obviously so too had Relais, damn his eyes.

On the other side of the bookshelf, Hardhands's small niece and fiancée is sitting on the floor with a slick dog head in her lap, pulling slick dog ears. Next to her a man leans, elegant in blinding white, also petting a slick dog. Child and man have identical brilliant red hair, although Tiny Doom's color riots through squashy curls and her companion's hair is sheared short to his skull, thus sticks up in tiny pinprick spikes. The man is staring down at the child, avid.

"Cyrenacia!" says Hardhands sharply.

Cyrenacia looks up and waves, "Hiwya, Bwannie! This puppy has twinty nears."

Sometimes it is impossible to understand what the hell she is saying; not that Hardhands cares what she is saying, but not caring doesn't make it any less annoying. He would snatch the child up, but he can't because her father is blocking his grab, and also because his knees are somewhat weak.

Julien Brakespeare releases the dog ears he is fondling and smiles at Hardhands: "Ave, your grace."

Hardhands is not, as previously noted, his grandmamma's grandson for nothing. Though Julien's smile makes his heart flip-flop, he returns a wintry frosty cold smile that will later make battle-hard soldiers weep like little babies but which at this moment, on this person, has null effect.

"Ave, Lord Brakespeare."

Relais appears at Hardhands's side, glaring in an ugly way and clutching at Hardhands's white silk elbow. Both Hardhands and Julien Brakespeare ignore him, and he tightens his grip on Hardhands, not that that will make any difference.

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"As it is so," Julien Brakespeare replies and the two men bow and touch clenched fists gently together. The only reason that Julien Brakespeare's lungs are still on the inside of his body, instead of flapping around outside, is because the Pontifexa has bound herself to the rule of law. She is a liberal tyrant with specific ideas regarding the self-imposed limits of her own power and her place within the framework of justice. The Superior Court of Califa upheld Julien Brakespeare's right to his own child, and the Pontifexa will not move against that — at least not publicly.

"Grrrrr," Cyrenacia growls, yanking on the hem of Hardhands's kilt. "Grrrrr...."

The two men stare at each other. An outside observer could think that their eyes are locked in hate, but they would be wrong.

Cyrenacia growls again, and whines a little, trying to scratch her ear with the tip of her cowboy boot, just like a puppy can. She has decided recently that being a puppy is more fun than being a little girl and she has been driving Hardhands, her grandmamma, and her grandmamma's suffering staff wild with her yipping, gamboling, barking, and insistence on lapping water out of a dish. Right now her whine is not driving anyone wild; it is being totally ignored.

"How are you, your grace?" Julien asks.

"Well, thank you, and yourself, my lord?" Hardhands says politely.

The two men have not taken eyes off each other. They are in public and must be polite. Then Julien says one word, a harsh guttural word that blossoms a brief burst of dark red fire in the air. The word is in Barbarick, of course, the language of those things which cannot be spoken, and this word would have turned to ashes — literally — in an ordinary mouth. Julien Brakespeare has not an ordinary mouth, though, he's an adept of the rank of 0=11, the only such Califa has seen since the death of the Georgiana I, some seventy years previously, and in his mouth the word is forceful and compelling. The sea-salt gray dogs flop over, pink noses tipping upward in sleep. The Egregore, who was slopping the albino bear grease in a ramekin, stops in mid-glop, eyes suddenly dead and empty. Relais's grip relaxes and he sits down with a thump that no one notices. Cyrenacia's whining stops. A sudden silence cups the Magick Box, a silence then broken by Julien's soft voice: "I must leave in three days or your grandmamma will have my lungs."

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"She will not act against the law," Hardhands says. "She'll try to get around it, but she'll not go obviously against it."

Julien sighs, a sigh which holds the weight of the world in it. "I fear that the Pontifexa has blood, not justice, on her mind. I did not kill Sidonia, Ban. I swear it. She died in childbed, died of our son, leaving me alone and bereft. All I wish is to live in my House, peacefully, with my daughter, and to forget the past. But the Pontifexa will not realize it, she will not accept my sincerity. I truly rue, I do, Banastre, and so did Sidonia. She died with Georgiana's name on her lips and wanted nothing more than to see us reconciled."

"I told you, Julien," Hardhands says impatiently, "She plans on moving around the law with this sub-rosa marriage. She is too conscious of her high standing to move against you any other way. And her plans are worthless now — I will forestall them, as I promised. The marriage will never happen; she'll be dead first."

"Yet she thinks she acts from the best of intentions," says Julien.

"Ha! She says she acts from love — what the hell does she know of love? She is duty and honor and nothing more. She only knows her own Will, the Wills of those around her are invisible and irrelevant to her, she asks for others to sacrifice, but she will give up nothing. Damn her. Damn her to the Abyss!"

"You speak treason," Julien says, grinning.

"Ayah, so? It's the truth and we know it. Anyway, it doesn't matter — none of this matters, for she'll be soon enough dead and you will have nothing to fear, Julien," Hardhands says, breathlessly.

Their hands meet again, only this time, as the avid audience is now blissfully unaware, their fingers intertwine, and then their bodies follow suit. Since the trial began they have seen each other infrequently, and then under the lens of the Pontifexa, the court, or the diva-dreadful newsrags. Secret meetings have been few and far in between, but when so, they have been hot and burning, and full of schemes. Hardhands is riding the rapids of youth and all he can think of is Julien, and the force and fire of their love. Nothing else seems to matter.

After a few seconds, Julien disengages and says: "What of Springheel Jack?"

Hardhands answers, somewhat distracted: "I couldn't reach him, but it matters not. I have a better plan. Less messy."

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Julien frowns. "And this would be, darling?"

Hardhands tells Julien about the poison and his plans for administering it to the Pontifexa. Julien's frown disappears. He kisses Hardhands tenderly, and for a minute Hardhands feels like a shell has exploded inside his skull, Julien's love is that potent. Their reverie is broken by the sound of growling coming from somewhere around their knees. They break apart and look down. Tiny Doom is gamboling around their boots, yipping and growling.

"Get up, Cyrenacia," Hardhands commands. "That floor is filthy."

"Woof-woof!" says Cyrenacia, worrying the hem of his kilt with sharp little teeth.

"Stop that!"

Cyrenacia paws at his boots, begging like a puppy who wants to be petted. This doggie thing is getting out of hand. It was cute for the first five minutes, but those five minutes are long since past. Before Hardhands can do anything to scotch her behavior, Julien reaches with one somewhat unkindly hand, and hauls the child upward.

"You were told to stop," he says.

Cyrenacia halts in mid-growl. Her mouth opens, to roar, and then her father says: "Don't you dare," and such is her surprise that no sound actually comes out. "This child has terrible manners, Banastre."

Hardhands wrinkles his white brow. Tiny Doom is annoying, true, but he'd never particularly noticed terrible manners. In fact, both Paimon and the Pontifexa are harridans when it comes to "please," "thank you" and "excuse me" and thus Hardhands and Tiny Doom rarely forget to echo these sentiments appropriately.

"She has been under the Pontifexa's thumb for only six months and look at her," Julien hauls the child up higher, in such a fashion that she cannot possibly wiggle her way free. Her face is screwed up, but she makes no sound, staring up at her father with eyes like little blue marbles. "Why was she permitted to leave Bilskinir dressed like that? She looks like a rag picker, not the Heir to the House Bilskinir and the City of Califa."

Hardhands looks at his niece. "I thought she looked rather swell," he says, somewhat doubtfully. "I mean, she's cute, isn't she?"

He reaches over and takes Tiny Doom out of Julien's grip. She is as rigid as a wooden doll, but as soon as Julien lets go of her, she snatches at

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Hardhands and holds on to him for dear life, clutching at his shoulders, her knees digging into sides. Her hair smells orangey; Hardhands is suddenly reminded of his darling grandmamma.

"Tiresome I think is the word you are looking for," Julien says. He brushes his hands together; he has not taken his gloves off and now they are slightly grubby, for Hardhands was right, the floor Cyrenacia was crawling on is filthy. "Not that it shall matter much, soon."

Cyrenacia is now snuffling into Hardhands's neck, so he digs into the pocket of his frockcoat for a clean hankie and while he mops her nose, he and Julien make their final plans. Then Julien flicks another Barbarick word off his tongue. This word is bright cerise and it fills the room with a jagged light. When the light fades, the hounds roll over and yawn, the Egregore finishes glopping, Relais sits up suddenly, and Julien is gone. Tiny Doom howls when Hardhands tries to put her down. Even when they stop for ice cream and pink popcorn — at a place cleaner than Guererro's but not as flavorable — she will not let go.

IV.

SO, HERE WE HAVE Hardhands in his parlor, his office, his Conjuring Room. As he does not rely on atmosphere to get his Will off, the room is simple and compact, with none of the falderal so often associated with the magickal arts. The walls are curved and white, the floor soft blue, and at the apex of the domed ceiling, a circular window stares like an eye into the night sky. As with most liminal spaces, the room is round.

Hardhands stands in the middle of a circle drawn out of blue cornmeal. His eyes are closed, his arms extended outward, as though to catch the magickal Current, and the air surrounding him glitters and sparks from the sound that is humming in his chest. This noise does not throb and blast like the noise from a percussion dæmon, but it's a pretty darn big vibration, and from its incredible vibrato all the nasty little flourishes that cluster around the Current, that cluster around the Will, that just plain cluster, evaporate in horror. Hardhands can banish like no other; Aethyr that has been scrubbed clean by his aural vibrations stays clean for days, even when the circle is dropped. He's good at pushing things

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away, is our boy, and not so perhaps clever at drawing them in, but he is still young.

The last vowel vibrated and the banishing done, Hardhands launches right into the opening of a Vortex. He spins his arms, stopping at each quarter of the circle, to expel an incendiary Barbarick word. These sounds hang in the air, incandescent coldfire flames that flicker brilliant colors off Hardhands's set face, striping him as if with warpaint. When he is done, and the last explosive word burns before him, patterning a burning crosshatch of four arrows, eight points in all, he gathers into himself all of his Force and Fire, his Galvanic Heart, his Steel Will, and flings this mass of energy outward with a flick of opening fists. The force of his fire hits the Vortex, which catches it and holds it in the middle of its pointed web. For a minute the energy hangs there in the middle cross-hatching, and then Hardhands reaches out with a casual hand, and gives the topmost arrow point a good spin.

The Vortex begins to spin, slowly first, then gaining momentum, the colors of the arrow points swirling into one sinuous octarine blur. As the Vortex picks up movement, it starts to hum, a low sound that cannot be heard, but which rattles the floor beneath, shakes the wall, and slowly turns into a gathering roar that ripples outward. The floor is shivering, the paint on the wall rippling. A crack has appeared in the center of the Vortex, and through this crack spills a dark blackness that is blindingly bright. Anyone outside the circle who looked into the Vortex's heart would find their eyeballs dribbling right out of their sockets.

Hardhands throws his head back, his loosened hair whipping loligo-like around his face and chest. "*Chayofaque!*"

The Vortex sucks into itself with a thunderclap. The window above cracks and little fragments of glass shower downward, speckling Hardhands's hair like falling stars. Bilskinir shudders once, like a man who has just been drenched with a bucket full of cold water, and drops a full three inches before Paimon, jerked out of his jelly-making, is able to stabilize the House's foundations. Happy for Hardhands that the Pontifexa is attending a performance of *Guillermo el Sangre* at the Hippodrome and that by the time the ritual's shockwave reaches into the City it has dissipated into a small rumble that is absorbed by the opera's orchestration. The sangyn-colored aiguillettes in the Pontifexa's hair do bob a bit,

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but she attributes that to the incredibly high range of the soubrette singing the part of the ingénue and does not at all consider that her grandson may be at home ripping apart the Aeythr with his bare hands.

Back in his circle, the explosion has left Hardhands fireblown but unburned. His hair is sparking a bit, though, and there is a faint glow to his skin, the glow of satisfaction, of completion, of a really damn fine evocation. His Vortex has gone from immediately apparent to lingering afterglow and now he's ready to get down to brass tacks. The Aeythr around him is scrubbed clean of nasties, and charged crackling full of Current. Time to begin.

He breaks the circle of cornmeal because he doesn't need it anymore, and, wringing his hair back from blood-speckled shoulders, kneels before a small humpback trunk. From this trunk he withdraws a pack of cards and a small mortar and pestle. He takes these things back into the center of the circle, scattering cornmeal with his bare feet, and sits down cross-legged. The air is supercharged, waiting, and as he draws it into his lungs, his blood tingles in his veins. He's feeling spiffy and he sings *Let me be your salty dog, or I won't be your man at all, let me be your salty dog* just for the sheer joy of watching his own voice snap and crack around him.

The items that he purchased from the Magick Box are already unpacked and waiting. Brushing his wayward hair back yet again, Hardhands bends to the task at hand. He pours and mixes, whispering fragments of Barbarick that wisp about his face and hands like wiggly little moths. A stray word flutters about his face and he waves it away absently, twists and ties threads into sigils, words into colors, powders into power. It's a dangerous procedure, one wrong move and he could blow a hole right into next week, but he has supreme confidence in his own abilities and he does not falter once. The sigil completed and glittering before him, he takes a pot of Madam Twanky's Fornication-Red lip pomade and squashes its brilliant pigment into the mortar. He adds the glittering sigil, and begins mashing. It takes a few minutes of muscle-cracking, teeth-clenching effort to incorporate the sigil into the pomade, but he presses downward, nudging the process forward with a few swear words, and then it is done. He glops the now quivering pomade back into its small pot, and puts the lid back on. Madam Twanky's face stares at up him, teeth caught in

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a grin, her hair piled high on her head like whipped cream, surrounded by grinning monkey putti heads. LET ANGELS KISS YOUR SOUL IN BLISS! scrolls underneath Madam Twanky's friendly face. Angels, indeedy.

Hardhands seals the pot and puts it to one side. He sweeps the remnant of his sigil making into the crumbled paper bag and then, cracking the Aeythr around him slightly, thrusts the evidence through. There is nothing to show for his business but the faint glimmering riming the interior of the mortar, and the smirk on Hardhands's face.

Now that the work is done, he's in a cheery cherry mood, thinking of the fun to come and the joy with Julien, and how once the Pontifexa is out of the way nothing is going to get in their way. Julien can rule the kid, do the power thing, and Hardhands and his band will do everything else. Wanting to revel in his spiffy mood and anticipate the future happiness ahead of him, Hardhands decides to indulge himself in a little divinatory spelunking and spills the cards out of their stained silk wrapper. They fall like leaves before him, little plackets of bright colored pasteboard, whose backs are marked with a six-pointed hexagram. He scatters the cards further with a brush of his hand, and says:

"Present!"

A card flips upward in response to his question, turning itself over helpfully. *The Three of Pistols: Mutation*. Hardhands frowns, a wee bit surprised. Mutation is not an auspicious card; it signifies things gone awry, and when you have just done a major working, involving major mojo, you do not want to be told by the Aeythr that anything might possibly go awry.

Hardhands flicks his fingers at the scattered cards and another piece of pasteboard flips to his command. *Eight of Banners: Bombast*. Although the meaning of this card is clear enough, as a clarifier to the first card, its appearance is confusing. Bombast is not a quality that young Hardhands wishes to associate with himself. He gives up on the present and jumps to the happiness to come.

"Future!"

Jack of Pistols: Abandon. The frown becomes a deep line between Hardhands's black-rimmed eyes. *Abandon* is a wishy-washy card — it can mean the release of restriction, but it can also mean betrayal and being left behind. He flips for clarification: *Six of Banners: Skullduggery*. Definitely

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on the wrong side of wishy-washy. The Pontifexa is going to mess him up, still. What is she up to that he does not know?

"Explain."

Flip. *The Scout*. Hardhands snatches at the card. A coyote dances across pasteboard, pink tongue lolling in a laugh, brushy tail bobbing insultingly. The Scout is the card of deception, of jibes, of mockery. The coyote has green eyes. The Pontifexa's eyes are welkin blue, but Julien, oh, Julien has eyes as green as grapes. Hardhands's lovely dinner (olive and porpoise galantine and coconut fool) is starting to fidget uneasily in his tummy. His lovely dinner does not like these portents any more than Hardhands himself does. He had expected to get all happy cards: *Ten of Pistols: Release* or *Eight of Pearls: Harmony*. Instead, it's all fire and air, which, of course, mix to becoming lightning, and lightning scorches and destroys all it touches.

Hardhands flips again, this time touching the card with a long finger to hold it still. *Three of Banners: Nuisance*. Although the image is a familiar one, tonight it has a strange resonance: the Three of Banners shows a small child pulling on the tail of a wolf. The wolf is turning its head, slavering jaws yawning wide, and there's no question about what is going to happen next. The child has bobbing red hair.

"Future," Hardhands says again, and now his voice is hoarse.

The Four of Bones shoots upward, and he ducks back. He grabs for it, and swears as its edge slices into his fingers. *Chastisement*. The child on this card has red hair, too. And so does the man who is slitting her throat with a razor. A large pink stuffy pig in dancing shoes is watching this operation, dispassionately, from the abandoned crib.

Hardhands puts the card down and stares into the darkness of the room, chewing on his lip, raw still from the ardor of Julien Brakespeare's kiss. He twists his hands together, once, twice, clenching his fingers into crunchy fists. He looks at the cards laid out before him: *Mutation, Abandon, Bombast, The Scout, Nuisance, Chastisement*. He cracks his fingers again; now they are almost bloodless from his clenching.

"Alfonso, front and center."

A jag of darkness opens up and a water elemental squeezes through. It raises its bowler to Hardhands, and flips its tail in greeting: "Ayah, jefe? Que quieres? I was having chow."

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"I want to talk to my sister. Find her and bring her here."

The elemental frowns, scratches its little head with one tiny hand. "I dunno, jefe, your circle is torn, and — "

Hardhands flicks Alfonso with a short but potent word in Barbarick. The elemental momentarily disappears in a haze of roiling color, and when the color fades, he looks a wee bit scorched around the edges. Smoke tendrils up from his little hat. The distinct smell of fried fish floats on the air.

"Now."

The elemental flicks its tail and darts back through the Vortex.

Hardhands puts his gear away, but he leaves the Vortex open for Alfonso's return. He walks around and around the room, but that doesn't make Alfonso return any faster, nor does it calm his beating heart. He keeps looking down at the cards in his hands, as though they might have changed through the sheer force of the hammering of his heart, but each time he looks down, they remain the same. The coyote grins up at him until he flips the card face down, ignoring the plaintive yipping. The wolf still turns to snap at the child. The stuffy pig still stares. Hardhands's bare feet leave little bloody smears on the floor, from the broken glass, but he ignores the pain. Pain is just weakness leaving the body and his mind is on other things. A faint fresh breeze, smelling of salt and water, drifts down from the open space above.

His thoughts are piling up on top of each other, and each thought is hotter than the last until he feels as though he might actually be on fire, and he is surprised that his mind can be so warm and yet his flesh so cold and crawling. He looks at *Chastisement* again; Julien is smiling and holding the edge of the bloody razor to his lips. The child lies broken on the floor. The stuffy pig is sodden with blood.

"Alfonso!" He can't wait any longer.

The elemental zips out of the Vortex, his tale flapping like a windvane.

"I cannot find her!" he says breathlessly.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't find her," Alfonso says. "I looked everywhere, but she's gone. There's nothing left."

"That's impossible," Hardhands says. He reaches out to grab Alfonso,

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but the elemental flips away, holding onto his hat. "There is always something left — a shade of ourselves, a fragment, she's only been dead for six months, that is not enough time for her to cross the Abyss and go on. You didn't look hard enough."

"I did, I did!" The elemental protests. "I did. I called and called, but she did not come."

"You mean she is not dead?" A dim hope flickers in Hardhands's throat.

"Neither living nor dead," Alfonso says, "She is Nowhere. She is gone."

"That is impossible," Hardhands says again, stubbornly. He snaps a Barbarick word at the elemental, who this time is prepared to dodge, and does.

"Not for some," says Alfonso cunningly, poised for flight. "Not for some."

Julien. Treacherous remorseless kindless Julien. It's as though the top of Hardhands's brain has been yanked off and absolute certainty poured in, and suddenly he knows, he knows. The Pontifexa had been right all along. Julien Brakespeare killed his sister, and not content with killing Sidonia Brakespeare's body, he killed her spirit too, sucked up her soul. It's a great trick and one that only a great adept can pull off, to abrogate a person so completely that it is as though she had never even existed. It is a dirty trick, the worst one in the world. Hardhands snatches again and this time Alfonso does not flick away fast enough. He's caught, trapped, stuck in a grip so tight that if he were real flesh he'd be squeezed into a tiny pulp, a wiggling mass of struggling goo.

The elemental gurgles and twitches —

"Bwannie!"

Holypigface. Hardhands almost drops the squirming elemental. Tiny Doom is standing in the cornmeally wreckage of his circle. How the hell did she get in? He always locks the door — not that it would make any difference to Paimon or the Pontifexa, but he locks it anyway, for the symbolic value of the gesture, if nothing else. He's momentarily forgotten that she's the Heir to the Bilskinir and therefore no part of the House is closed to her.

"You are supposed to be in bed," he says.

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Tiny Doom is clutching a stuffy pink pig as big as her head, and her nightcap is dangling around her neck from its cords. Carpy teeth slice into Hardhands's fingers and he lets go of Alfonso with another explicitly nasty word. The elemental darts back into the seam of the Vortex and is gone.

"I had a cold dweam," Tiny Doom says. She patters toward him, scattering the cards farther with bare sandy feet, and, remembering suddenly the scattered glass, he snatches her up. She puts chubby arms around his neck and says: "A biswuit would make me warm."

Her weight is very heavy in his arms. The pig is slightly damp from drool, but it's nice and cuddly, too. Hardhands's anger has evaporated into a calm dreamy feeling. His love has curdled into something equally dreamy, but much more hard.

"Hey, I am bloody," she says.

He jerks. "What?"

"My foot is all bleedy."

He twists her around for inspection, and she grabs onto the dangling reins of his hair. The sole of her foot is grubby gray, except where it is smeary red.

"Oww," she says, as he pokes the spot from whence the blood wells. His fingernail scrapes and comes away with a tiny shard of glass.

"It was just a piece of glass," he says. "You'll live."

"Kiss and make well," she commands.

Hardhands doesn't really want to kiss her grubby foot, but he doesn't want to listen to her caterwaul either, so he obediently puckers up his lips. Her foot is warm and the blood is slightly sticky. Sweet sticky Haðraaða blood.

"Better?"

"A biswuit would make it better." She smashes a sloppy wet kiss on his cheek.

He sighs. "You are a pain in my ass, baby. Hold your ears."

She covers her ears, obediently, dropping the pig in the process. He shuts down the Vortex with a twist of Barbarick (a shortcut he is later going to regret) and kicks the scattered cards out of his way.

"With honey, my biswuit." Tiny Doom adds, "Gimme Pig."

Hardhands dangles her downward. Giggling, she snatches at Pig.

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"Grab that pot, too."

She grabs, obediently, and he swings her aloft, takes the jar of Madam Twanky's Fornication-Red Lip Pomade from her. Then swings her higher, to settle on his shoulders. They gallop downstairs to the kitchen and Paimon's fifteen-mile-high buttermilk biscuits. Hardhands is ravenous and his mind is now made up.

V.

JULIEN IS WAITING by the swing set, which moves idly back and forth in the chill night breeze, creaking a little uncomfortably just like a gibbet. He is muffled in a greatcoat, his chapeau du bras pulled low over his forehead, but still he looks rather cold. Hardhands nudges Fleeter forward toward the shadow of the slide. Fleeter doesn't care much for the bulk of the slide and wiggles a bit, but Hardhands's thighs are firm and she settles down quickly. He slides down, and Tiny Doom, who has fallen asleep in her uncle's muffling arms, wakes up at his movement, yawning loudly in his ear.

"Waffles?"

"Soon," promises Hardhands.

"Ayah," she says, and put her head back down on his shoulder. He adjusts his shawl up over her head and then ties Fleeter to the slide.

"You are late," Julien says.

"I'm sorry. I overslept," Hardhands says, who has not actually closed his eyes for two days. He shifts Tiny Doom's heavy weight to his other shoulder. It's the cold edge of morning and the eucalyptus trees surrounding the small lake drip with wetness. Julien's minions cluster near the picnic tables. They are passing around a bottle of whiskey and the general complaint that they had to get out of their warm beds to come and stand around in the fog.

Hardhands and Julien touch fists together, briefly, aware of decorum, aware of the eyes of the minions.

Julien looks at the bundle in Hardhands's arms and curls his lip. "Why did you bring the child?"

"I thought you would want to see her."

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Julien's lip does not uncurl. "It's too cold and damp out here. She should be home in bed."

"Perhaps so we all should be, darling," Hardhands says with a meaningful glance. "But sometimes necessity requires early rising." He jiggles Little Tiny Doom and she opens her eyes reluctantly. She is not a morning person.

"Kiss your father," Hardhands commands Cyrenacia. She wrinkles her nose, and her father follows suit. But when Hardhands leans her toward Julien, she obediently purses her lips. Her kiss leaves a little red smear on his cheek, which he wipes away distastefully with a snowy white hankie.

"Is it done?" Julien asks.

"Ayah," Hardhands answers. "It is done."

"I have saved you then, Banastre." The two men walk together to the statue of the Goddess Califa. Her gleaming golden skin is slick with glittery moisture, and the dog crouching at her feet looks somewhat bedraggled and in need of a good shake. Legend has it that the Goddess Califa was born from the little lake, which is the City's only natural body of water. This spot, then, is the most sacred place in Califa, the City's secret center, its heart, the wellspring of its Current.

"What did you save me from, Julien?"

Rather than answering, Julien fishes in his pocket. He spins a gold coin upward. It lands neatly in the Goddess's quiver. "The Pontifexa's whims. The patents of mediocrity. Ah, the arrows of desire," he says, looking upward at the Archer, "And the bow of burning gold. What fun we shall have, Ban. No one will hold us now. It is hard to be patient now, when we are so close. How long shall it take, do you think?"

"Not long, not long."

"We must remain discreet, Banastre."

"I know."

"That puppy is cold," Cyrenacia says. She has made no movement to get down from Hardhands's arms, and that is just as well as he has no desire to let her go, even if she does feel as though she weighs one hundred pounds and her knees are grinding into his hipbones.

"He's not a real dog," her father says. He rubs his cheek absently.

"Not now he is not," Hardhands says. "But on the full Moon, you know, he and the Goddess get down off the plinth and they hunt."

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"Bunnies?"

"No. Not bunnies. What do they hunt, Julien?"

"I have no idea, Ban. This is a story that I haven't heard," Julien has lit a cigarillo and he blows a twist of smoke upward. "Do tell. If not bunnies, what?"

"Faithless lovers, of course," Hardhands says. "Those who say that they love, but lie. Spit." This is to Cyrenacia, not Julien. She spits into his hankie, giggling, and he rubs the rouge off her lips, then wads the hankie up and flicks it away.

Julien has turned from the statue, looking out over the lake. Now he turns back to Hardhands just in time to see the spitting operation. He frowns.

"I would hunt bunnies," says Cyrenacia. "What is the puppy's name?"

"Justice," says Hardhands. He is talking to Julien now, not Cyrenacia.

"What do you mean?" Julien says. His voice has become a razor wire, and it could cut through glass, through steel, through bone. Hardhands does not answer him. He is smiling, and in that smile he suddenly looks remarkably like the Pontifexa, for all the difference in height, the difference in hair, the difference in sex.

Now it is Cyrenacia who is frowning, a charming little wrinkly frown that turns her lips into a little pink knot. "I would name that puppy Bouncer. I want my waffles."

"So do I," says Hardhands. "Come on, Tiny Doom, let's go home. Grandmamma is waiting."

"I love puppy," says Tiny Doom. She waves. "Bye, puppy!"

"What have you done, Banastre?" Julien says. He touches his cheek again. It has gone numb and there is a spreading darkness slowly seeping into the edges of his vision. "What have you done?"

"Changed my mind," Hardhands says.

So, here we have Hardhands walking away from Julien, who has sat suddenly down on the damp ground, his legs as empty as air. Hardhands is fifteen years old and his hands are still white and tender, but his conscience is now hard as bone. He's on his way.

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Chet Williamson is the author of such novels as Dreamthorp, Reign, *and* Second Chance. *He was a frequent contributor to our pages in the 1980s, but in the past decade his writing efforts have gone into novels more than short stories. His short fiction was collected recently in* Figures in Rain, *which won the 2003 International Horror Guild Award and was nominated for the World Fantasy Award. He returns to our pages with a horror story about regrets and questions of what might have been.*

The Pebbles of Sai-No-Kawara

By Chet Williamson

...but the demon with the iron club would come and knock down the piles of stones. Then the Bodhisattva Jizô would hide the children in his sleeves and drive the demon away....

LATTIMORE HAD NEVER seen a sadder place. It was pleasant enough if you looked at it in ignorance, but when you knew what each of the little statues represented, when you knew why many of them wore red bibs or caps, when you knew why there were small toys and stuffed animals sitting on the stone ledges, then your heart could break.

Lattimore had seen the sad places of the Earth. He had trod the killing fields in Southeast Asia, he had breathed in the dust of what was once the World Trade Center, he had walked the streets of Sarajevo and Kandahar. Journalism had taken him to those places and many more, less known and far worse. Just two days ago he had been to Hiroshima for the first time, had seen the Peace Memorial Park and the A-Bomb Dome, and had fought

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back tears at the sight of the thousands of paper cranes placed by little hands at the Children's Memorial.

All of these places, however, signified lives lived and then stopped, while the Jizô-dô at Kamakura's Hase Kannon Temple was redolent with the atmosphere of lives never begun. Every one of the thousands of small statues of the smiling, bald-headed Bodhisattva Jizô had been placed, rank upon rank, by parents of children who had been stillborn, miscarried, or aborted.

Jizô was loved because his compassion could free the children from hell, to which they had been sent for having caused their parents so much grief. It was only one of the Japanese conceits that made little sense to Lattimore. It was, after all, not the fault of the children that they had died before birth, and surely not their fault that they had been aborted. That was the parents' sin, if sin it was.

Lattimore, despite his experiences, still believed that abortion should be an option, and had once chosen it as such. It had meant little to him when they were so young. Only later, when he and Carolyn had had a child at a more convenient period in their lives, did he begin to question their action. His daughter had grown into an intelligent, kind, and caring woman, and there were occasions just before dawn when Lattimore would lie in bed sleeplessly, and wonder about Tracy's older brother or sister, thinking of what he might have become, or who she might have been.

He and Carolyn never talked about it, though they had both agreed at the time that it was the reasonable thing for them to do. Now, thirty years on, he could tell that this place was affecting her as deeply as it was him. Her eyes were damp with restrained tears as she handed him the guidebook and he read about the little red or white bibs and hats with which parents decorated the statues of Jizô in the hope that he would take extra special care of their children's spirits.

With a thick lump in his throat Lattimore read on, about how the children in hell gather by the dry riverbed of Sai-no-Kawara, where they build small cairns of pebbles to attract the attention and the compassion of the Buddha. Belief in this aspect of the legend seemed strong as well, since many piles of pebbles littered the ledges and walks, left by parents trying to shorten their children's time in hell.

Carolyn, her head down, continued up the pathway to the larger halls,

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but Lattimore could not follow her, even though he wished to. The atmosphere would not let him. He could not separate himself from the statues, ranging in height from four inches to over a foot. Row upon row of them climbed the heavily wooded hill.

He couldn't figure out if the items left beside and near them were offerings to Jizô or gifts for the children. There were flowers and opened bottles of soda, small metal cars, brightly colored pieces of origami, and pinwheels turning in the light breeze. On one ledge, at the feet of an alcoved Jizô, were two Tarepanda, the stylized stuffed panda toys that seemed to be in every gift shop window. They were in a sitting position, the little one leaning against the larger, and were staring intently, their large black eyes rimmed by white, at the rows of the beloved Bosatsu.

Slowly Lattimore went up the steps in the direction his wife had taken, but he continued to watch the statues, their bald heads looking like beads on an abacus crowded beyond use. He found Carolyn outside the Kannon Hall, and after examining the massive yet graceful Hase Kannon, with its eleven faces of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, they retraced their steps back through the complex. As they passed the Jizô-dô, Lattimore slowed, but Carolyn hurried on and he increased his pace to catch up with her.

They both paused at the pond near the Bentenkutsu, the grotto made of several linked caves illuminated by torchlight, and watched the huge koi swimming. Then they went out onto the street and headed back to the small hotel at which they were spending the night. They stopped at a café on the way, where they each had a steaming bowl of ramen. From the way they laughed when they slurped their noodles, Lattimore felt hopeful that whatever dark memories the Jizô statues had brought them had dissipated.

The next day was Saturday, and Tracy, her work week over, would meet them for further touring. She was a reporter and columnist for one of the major Tokyo dailies, giving the gaijin side and reporting on American trends in Japan. As Carolyn never tired of reminding him, Tracy was her father's daughter, and he was extremely proud of her. She had long had a fascination with anything Japanese, and had made all her own breaks, working her way through the additional year of college in Tokyo, and finding her job on her own, Lattimore's name being little known in Japan.

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She was an extraordinary person and Lattimore could not help but wonder, lying in bed that night, if his other, long lost, never born child might have been just as wondrous. He had never been struck by his self-imposed loss so strongly as he had today. Every one of those statues seemed accusatory, almost as though the small Jizôs were the lost babies themselves, small and hairless and newly formed.

What the memories of the temple made him grieve for was not the loss of an actual child, but the loss of the *potential* person who might have been. And yet, he tried to rationalize, if one thought that way, one would do nothing but try to procreate in the attempt to bring high achievers into the world. That road, once taken, could lead to total banishment of contraception as well as limitations on reproductive choice, and he most certainly did not agree with either of those options. When you made your choice, you lived with your guilt if you defined it as such, and three decades afterward, he involuntarily and unwillingly had.

It chewed at him so that he could not sleep, and he quietly got up and sat in a chair. The room was too small, however, for him to turn on a light without waking Carolyn, and he did not wish to sit in the bathroom with a book, so he decided to get dressed and take a short walk. He wrote *Couldn't sleep — went for walk — back soon* on a pad by the phone and left the room, closing the door gently behind him, the idea forming in his head of what he would do under the cover of the night.

The man behind the front desk looked at him curiously, and Lattimore said in English, "No sleep...walk," and made his fingers wiggle like the legs of a walking man, a gesture he hoped would be universal. The night manager gave him only a curious smile and a little nod, and Lattimore stepped out into the street.

The narrow residential streets were quiet at two in the morning, except for an occasional barking dog or the sound of a car or motorcycle blocks away. Lattimore walked back the way they had come from the temple that day, since it was the only route he knew, or so he pretended. In actuality, his plan was almost fully formed by now.

The parking lot in front of the Hase Kannon Temple was dimly lit, but Lattimore stayed in the shadows anyway. The main gate would be locked, of course, but the wall surrounding the temple complex was not impassable. A thick-boled tree stood by it, and, keeping to the darkness, he made

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his way to it, climbed into its heavy branches, and gingerly leaped to the top of the wall. He struggled to maintain his balance, but fell into the blackness on the other side.

He landed on the loose stones of a walkway, and let himself go down on his hip and side. The noise he made sounded loud to him, but he waited and heard no reaction to it. Maybe there were no watchmen, he thought. Few Japanese would be profane enough to break into a temple complex, and no foreigners would have a motive. There was nothing to steal outside but the personal offerings and statues, and the temple buildings where the relics were kept were surely locked and probably set with alarms.

Lattimore stuffed his pockets with stones from the walkway, and moved stealthily toward the Jizô-dô. To be caught would be at the least embarrassing, so he tried to stay off the paths and in the shadows of the trees and shrubbery. The Moon was nearly full, lighting his way to the outside of the small hall. He looked about and listened intently before he stepped out of the shadows.

There, on a long flat ledge beneath an ancient shade tree and surrounded by ranks of the tiny statues, was a larger statue of the Bodhisattva. It was seated, one hand raised as if in blessing. Lattimore got on his knees in front of it, and took the stones from his pocket. With them he started to build a small cairn, setting a first, flat layer and then adding to the pile until at last he had a small pyramid.

The simple act of making the cairn focused his mind on his self-chosen loss, and filled his heart with the tears he would not allow himself to cry. When he had finished, he looked into the stone face of Jizô and whispered, "Please take care of him."

It made sense for it to be a son that they had never had. He had a daughter, so it had to have been a son. Now, as he knelt before this Bodhisattva, this Enlightened One who declined Nirvana so that he could remain and teach others, he felt foolish and sad and frightened. Most of all he felt confused. He had never been a superstitious person, so why was he kneeling before this statue, this idol in whom he could not bring himself to believe? Why had he gotten up in the middle of the night and risked arrest and scandal to pile pebbles in a temple?

Oh yes, the Jizô-dô was a tragic place, but it was primarily a superstitious place, a place where ignorance rather than grief was the strongest

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characteristic. It had swept up Lattimore in its raw emotions, and he had in turn reacted emotionally and irrationally.

The thought irritated him so that he reached out his hands and swept the pebbles away. They skittered across the ledge and fell onto the path, and he blanched at the sound. It was over, it was done and had been done years before, and piling up a few stones and whispering entreaties to a false god would accomplish nothing. He had been a foolish romantic, trying to expiate himself for an old act that should have been forgotten with bellbottom pants and love beads.

Lattimore pushed himself to his feet and walked down the steps, hoping that he could find a way to get out of the complex as easily as he had gotten in. The trees grew more thickly further away from the main gate. Perhaps he could find one to climb and then get over the wall again.

As he passed the entrance to the grotto he heard a sound that made him freeze. At first he thought it was just a cat, but as he listened more closely he knew that it was a human voice. It sounded like a baby crying, and he tried to determine where the wailing was coming from. To his surprise, the source seemed to be the dark opening into the grotto itself, and he walked toward it.

As he drew near, he saw that it wasn't dark after all. There was a dim light inside, and he wondered who was foolish enough to take a baby into that cave in the middle of the night. It would be impossible for him to fetch a watchman, but perhaps he could check to make certain that at least the child was with someone and not alone, having somehow been lost there when the temple closed.

It was a scenario he was spinning from moonlight, and he was sure of it when he heard the other voices. Try to deny it as he might, it was not the sound of one baby now, but several of them, and the closer he came to the mouth of the cave the more they grew in number, so that when he stood in the irregularly shaped doorway, he heard a multitude of babies all wailing as though in great pain. Part of his brain warned him to go back, but he was drawn into the cave. No warning, no threats of harm could have kept him outside. He knew that what he was hearing was impossible, that it was either a delusion or manifestation of something in which he did not believe, but his senses told him that it was real, and he followed them.

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He did not know how the cave was lit, only that it was just bright enough for him to see as he followed the sound. The grotto was different from when they had visited it during the day. He did not remember so many winding passages, nor did he recall the rock paths going ever downward the way they did now. He pressed on as though he were walking through a dream, ever following the sounds of crying, and those sounds grew until they seemed to be all around him, and at times he had to clear his throat to assure himself that it was not he who was making the noises.

He went on and downward for what seemed like hours, and he knew that another chamber must have been opened in the cave, one that he had not seen earlier. But at last the passage leveled out and the walls widened, and he came into a great open place, all of rock. The cave in which he stood and in which the babies toiled was impossibly wide, but not high, perhaps the height of three men, so that it seemed claustrophobic and oppressive.

Here the wailing was so great that he had to put his hands over his ears. It was even worse than the sight itself. There was nothing but babies, untold thousands, maybe millions of them, as far as he could see, lying in a depression as wide as the stone bed of some subterranean river long dried to dust. They were pitiful, hairless and naked and crawling like worms, none of them over six inches in length. Some had large hydrocephalic heads, others only rudimentary arms and legs, more like flippers than limbs. Their flesh was every color from deepest black to the white of ivory, and many seemed blind, their eyes no more than slits in the oversized globes of their heads. Others, however, had eyes that bulged fishlike from the sockets.

Most of them moved like fish would do on dry land, flopping, pushed by barely formed arms and legs. What they were doing with what limbs they had was what Lattimore had been doing at the Jizô-dô, pushing stones into piles, some with their arms, some with their heads. Only a few were able to grasp the individual pebbles with their hands and place them on others. The piles formed could scarcely be called such. Once any height was attained, the movement of their fellows in their own attempts to construct their own cairns would knock others down, and the task would start again. It was, Lattimore thought, like a day care....

In hell, yes. That's where he was, wasn't he, in the particular hell that

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accompanied this particular belief? And wasn't it also, he wondered, born of his own particular mindset on this particular night?

Whether figment or delusion or dream or reality, it was hideous. It was unbearable. The sounds of the babies, children, still-born creatures, damned hairless mice, whatever they were, bored through his skull like a drill, and although he kept his hands pressed over his ears, the torturous keening went through them as though they were paper. How could such unformed, fragile beings make such a powerful sound?

Then he recalled that there were millions, billions of them, squirming, glistening little maggots, all screaming at once, and the pain of it cut into and mingled with his own pain until he roared, and shook his hands in the air, and found his right fist to be wrapped around the handle of a heavy iron club. Though he could not imagine how he had found the strength to hold it, his pain made him strong, and he ran toward the mewling slugs in the dead riverbed, swinging the great club at them to make them stop their noise, the agony of which was killing him.

They parted before him like water streaming to either side of his path, and his swinging club touched only the small piles of stones, scattering the pebbles everywhere, undoing the work of the unformed hands, the brains that knew only pain. Lattimore ran down the riverbed, his head a fist of white fire, raining down blows at the tiny things that swept themselves from his path, so that his club struck only the rocks on which they had labored.

At last Lattimore stopped, panting. The pain in his head had grown no less, but something was different. He could see no more of the children ahead, nor to the side of him. They seemed to have swept around him and to his rear, and when he turned back in the direction he had come, he saw them not at all, but instead the Bodhisattva Jizô.

He was standing only a few yards away from Lattimore, and was wearing a long robe with full sleeves. His hands were in front of him, and the features on the round face beneath the bald head seemed to be a combination of those on the statues that Lattimore had seen earlier and those that graced the countenance of his own wife.

Jizô smiled Carolyn's smile and shook his head slowly, then spread his arms wide so that Lattimore could see into the full, hanging sleeves, the sleeves that sheltered the thousands and millions and billions of

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creatures who strove every second to be free of their hell by drawing the compassion of the Buddha, but so far had only earned the sympathy and protection of a Bodhisattva.

Then Jizô walked slowly toward Lattimore, whose sudden fear was greater than the pain caused by the children's voices. He backed away, dragging his great club, but the Bodhisattva stopped, and so did Lattimore, trembling. Though Jizô's mouth did not move, he heard the words in his head, like cool water upon the fire there.

Did you think that I wished it as well?

Lattimore didn't understand, but his mouth felt incapable of forming questions. He listened to the words, in the voice of Jizô, in the voice of his wife.

I did it for love of you. I did it for love.

One of the long sleeves turned over, and from it one of the tiniest creatures of all floated down like a blossom and lay on the rock floor, its small white body twitching.

The wisest. The most compassionate.

Like unto Buddha.

Lattimore knew. The words which had fallen like droplets of cool rain had turned to pellets of hot lead, and he ran, ran past the Bodhisattva, ran through the bed of the dead Sai-no-Kawara, ran to the mouth of the cave that had brought him into hell. The tunnel no longer led up, but down, and his heavy legs of spiked hide pounded the unyielding stone. He dragged his iron club behind him with his clawed talons, and sweat ran down the thick, wiry hair of his face.

The voices of the children rang in his ears, and that of his own higher and louder and more piercing than them all, and though he plunged deeper into the caves, the wailing grew no softer. Soon he would have to turn and ascend and try to stop them once more, and so it would be, over and over again.

He would hear them enter and wait and pass away, and though they spent eternities there, he would still remain when all were gone, and their cries would stay with him when not one stone sat upon another.

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Those of you with long memories may recall meeting Quee Lee and Perri in "The Remoras" back in our May 1994 issue. Of course you needn't be familiar with that previous adventure to enjoy their new one, another imaginative science fiction story from Nebraska's leading sf writer. Mr. Reed reports that his novel Sister Alice *has recently been published, and we report that more goodies from Mr. Reed are in the works.*

River of the Queen

By Robert Reed

I

EVERY VOICE SPOKE OF THE Queen. "Where is She? Ascending! Do you see Her? In my dreams, yes! Do you smell Her? Absolutely, yes! The All ends, the new All walking in its tracks! Praise the Queen! Bring us the Queen! Where is She now? Ascending!" Stirred among the voices were animal grunts and hollers; better than any words, they captured the wild anticipation — a chorus of piercing, wordless roars that almost obscured the tumbling thunder of the great river. And behind the voices and roars were the percussive clack of nervous limbs and the extruded symphonies of pheromones, a giddy sense of celebration laid so thick across the setting that even a pair of human beings — mere tourists — could appreciate the unfolding of great, glorious things.

Quee Lee shivered beneath her robe, purring, "This is wonderful. Remarkable. And really, it hasn't even begun yet."

Her husband nodded and smiled, peering over the edge.

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"Can you see Her?" she joked.

"But I see some of Her entourage," Perri admitted. "Down in the mists. Can you make them out?"

The railing was made from thick old vines grown into elaborate knots, golden leaves withered, dried spore-pods ready to burst. Quee Lee leaned against the top vine. A beautiful woman in a thousand ways, she gazed into the mayhem of plunging water and endless snowstorms, her smile widening when a few wisps of black appeared for the briefest instant. Long albatross-style wings were trying to rest inside bubbles of calm air; a few of the Queen's devoted assistants were gathering themselves before resuming their long climb.

"Will the wind-masters reach us?" she inquired.

"Most won't." Perri had a young, almost pretty face, fine features amplifying a pair of clear bright eyes that could only be described as sweet. He had turned to the right, watching the main lane, watching thousands of Dawsheen wrestling for position. "The last time I was here," he allowed, "only a handful of those big flyers survived the climb."

"Is it too far?"

The cliff was more than eleven kilometers high.

"It's more the cold and snow, I think. And not just the wind-masters suffer. Most of Her entourage dies along the way." Then in the next breath, with an easy conviction, he added, "But still, this is the best place to be. This is Her final gathering point. Being here is an enormous honor."

"I know," Quee Lee sang. "I know."

Perri didn't mention costs. His wife had donated a substantial sum to the Dawsheen, and nothing would come from it but this one opportunity to endure the glacial cold, standing among the alien throngs to catch a glimpse of the fabled Queen. Their private vantage point was an ice-polished knob of black basalt. The river was to their left — a shrunken but still impressive body of water hugging the cavern wall, flowing hard and flat until it reached the neatly curled lip of the towering cliff. The city lay to their right, perched on the higher ground. Beneath the city, where the cliff was a dry black wall, a single zigzagging staircase had been etched into the stone. By custom and for every good reason, the Queen never took a step upward. Her assistants carried her beautiful bulk, using the honored old ways. On foot and with the fading strength of their limbs, they were

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bringing her up the final eleven kilometers of a grand parade that began centuries ago, in the warm blue surf of the Dawsheen Sea.

"She won't arrive for a little while," Perri cautioned. Then he touched Quee Lee with a fond hand, adding, "This is our ground. Nobody can take it from us. So why don't we go somewhere warm, and sit?"

"I don't want to miss — "

"'Any little thing.'" Perri winked with one of his sweet eyes. "But remember. This is a wonderful city in its own right, and in another week or two, there won't be anything left to see."

"We should walk around," she agreed.

Stepping back from the dying vines, he suggested, "And maybe we can treat ourselves...."

"'To a little drink or two,'" she said, doing a seamless imitation of her husband's voice.

"'To be social,'" he said, imitating his wife's voice and mannerly sense. "'To be polite.'"

Then together, inside the same moment, they thought of the city's fate. In another week or two, it was dead and buried under the relentless blizzards; and with that thought, a sudden respectful silence fell over the two of them, accompanying them as they moved hand in hand down their own little set of carved stone stairs.

II

Perri had that young face, for in a fashion, he was a youngster. Born on the Great Ship, he possessed an immortal's durability and memory, his body endowed with relentless good health. In ancient times, he would have looked like a man in his early twenties — adulthood just achieved, childhood still lurking in the face and manners. But time and age were different creatures today. The youngster was a few centuries more than forty thousand years old, and in that busy long life, he had explored just a tiny fraction of the avenues and caverns, chambers and odd seas that lay inside the Great Ship.

By contrast, Quee Lee preferred an older, more mature appearance. She moved like a woman who had forever to accomplish the smallest deed — a suitable façade, since she was considerably older than her husband.

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Born on the ancestral Earth, she still remembered that magical day when the first alien words and images were captured by telescopes. An explosion of learning and change was unleashed, her wealthy family becoming wealthier, and her own life extended beyond all calculable measure. Humanity expanded to the stars, but without Quee Lee. She preferred home and its comfortable pleasures. Then an automated probe discovered the Great Ship — a world-sized derelict still on the fringes of the Milky Way, falling out of deepest space. Humans claimed the Ship as their own. They made it habitable and sent it on a looping cruise around the galaxy. For a muscular fee, anyone could book passage. For a fortune, a wealthy individual could travel in seamless luxury. From the time of the pharaohs, old women had been embarking on great voyages. Starships and river barges served the same function: Here was a chance for novelty and learning, and maybe a little adventure or two, which was all the reason a lovely and rather naïve woman needed to abandon one comfortable life for another, beginning a lazy stroll around the Milky Way.

Husband and wife were perfectly at ease, walking up the wide lane, hands clasped and heads tipping toward one another whenever one of them spoke. Sometimes a finger would point, some little question asked and answered, or the question was repeated to a buried nexus, dislodging a nugget of information from some data ocean, another tiny piece of the Dawsheen existence explained to the curious tourists.

The little lane was covered with hard sheets of living wood, turquoise and photosynthetic when the weather was warm, but now turning black and soggy in the cold. No one else used the lane. Heaps and ridges of hard dirty snow stood to the sides, and behind the snow were vegetable masses, dome-shaped and crenulated where they pushed through the snow, their sides punctured with doorways leading into chambers of every size. What passed for leaves had died with the first hard freeze. The masses themselves were dying, choking under the snow while their roots froze with the soil. But the hollow chambers in their wooden hearts remained inhabited. Sheets were hung across the doorways, the heated air inside making them ripple, and the sloppy, half-melted ice on the thresholds was littered with the long, faintly human prints of busy feet.

In one sense, Dawsheen biology was perfectly simple. Diversity was low, ecosystems few and trimmed to a minimum of trophic levels. One

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species always held prominence based on intelligence and tools. For convenience's sake, the rest of the Ship referred to them as the Dawsheen. Tripeds with a single burly arm in front and two flanking arms tipped with delicate hands, in the high country they tended toward round-bodied and short. Their skin was the color of sun-bleached straw, and their hair turned from black to gold as they aged. They were normally vegetarian. The Dawsheen home world had small continents, and feeding a mature civilization meant eating low on the food chain. But whenever the All collapsed into winter, meat became a cheap, holy indulgence. As the lovers strolled away from the edge of the cliff, the smell of burning fats and spiced vitals began to fill the air. With a hungry sigh, Perri mentioned, "There was a restaurant, last time. On that hilltop, overlooking the river."

"Last time," she countered.

That was nearly a hundred centuries ago. But with a tug on the arm, he reminded Quee Lee, "The Dawsheen don't like change."

Sure enough, another eating establishment was perched on the summit. But the hill was smaller than Perri remembered, the rock scraped down by the last glaciation. And the view wasn't quite the spectacle that he had promised Quee Lee. For that, he apologized. Snow was falling again, fed by the drenched air and the gathering cold. They sat together in one of the communal booths, on the steeply tilted bench, gazing at a gray expanse of water and the swirling white of the snow, and except for the occasional slab of ice being carried toward the falls and its death, nothing seemed to change outside.

But that was fine. There was the building itself to enjoy — a great home-tree hollowed out by worms, the flat floor and immovable furniture carved with a million relentless mouths. They could happily study the creatures sitting and walking about. There were tourists of several species, plus Dawsheens too old and feeble to stand in the cold, waiting for their Queen. The indoor air felt warm and smoky. Most of the patrons stared at an interior wall sprinkled with live images from downstream. The Queen Herself was never quite shown; She was too important to be reduced to a mere digital stream. Instead, audiences were treated to the celebrations held in distant cities. Beneath the illusion of a warm blue sky, millions of Dawsheen stood in the open and sang, wishing their Queen luck and bravery on the trails awaiting Her, and in the trials awaiting their species.

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What passed for a waiter approached the two humans. Speaking through a translator, he called out, "Adore the Queen!"

"Adore the Queen!" they replied, amiable words transformed into an amiable singsong.

The alien face was narrow and stiff, the crest of hair turned a dull whitish gold. His breath smelled of broiled fish and exotic oils. Three pearl-colored eyes regarded them with no obvious emotion, but the translator made the voice sound angry. "She is a slow Queen," their waiter exclaimed. "A late Queen, at this rate."

Quee Lee glanced at her husband, waiting for advice.

With a shrug of shoulders, he told her to say nothing.

"If this weather worsens," the alien continued, "we will all be dead and frozen before she can Gather us."

A few of the elderly patrons growled in agreement.

The tourists shifted their weight against the polished wood. They had no menus, and no fees were expected. Where was the value of money when the world was dying? An enormous fire pit was dug into the middle of the room and lined with rock. Perri was ready to point at one of the platters of blackened food. But Quee Lee was a problem. As a rule, she didn't appreciate heads on her dinner —

"You've still got time," another voice called out. "The glacier isn't going to beat your little Queen!"

For an instant, Perri didn't notice what was different about the voice. Then he heard the singsong translation following in its wake, and curious now, he turned. Four humans were sitting in a distant booth. The largest man was glowering at their waiter. Two other men were cutting at the seared flesh, eating with a famished urgency. The final man stared out at the falling snow, saying nothing and apparently paying no attention to his companion's complaints.

The waiter turned toward them, lifting one leg while standing on the other two — the standard Dawsheen insult.

The talking man didn't seem to notice the gesture. "I want a fresh plate," he called out. "And I want you to stop badmouthing your Queen."

The Dawsheen dropped his leg and faced Quee Lee, a tight little voice asking, "What would you like to eat, madam?"

"Nothing," she allowed.

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"Ask me," the loud man called out. "I want something. Come here!"

"And you, sir?" the Dawsheen said to Perri. "I have a large pudding char that died of old age. For an adventurous set of stomachs, perhaps?"

Perri began to say, "Yes — "

"Hey!" the loud man shouted. "Before you're dead, old man. Why don't you pay a little attention to — "

Crack.

The sound was abrupt and astonishingly loud. No one was watching the loud man, and then everybody was. His face was beginning to bleed. His shattered nose hung limp on his face, too damaged to heal itself quickly. Two of his companions laughed quietly while they ate, enjoying his discomfort and embarrassment. The other man continued to stare out at the relentless snow, his face and posture unchanged, while his left hand slowly and carefully set an empty iron platter back on the worm-carved table where it belonged.

III

The Dawsheen home world was a cyclic snowball.

Many worlds were. Even the young Earth passed through its own snowball phase. Watery bodies with a few small continents were most susceptible, particularly when their continents lay scattered along the equator. If its sun's energies flagged, or if the world's orbit shifted by the tiniest margin, the dark open waters at the poles would abruptly freeze over. Sea ice was a brilliant smooth white. Light and heat were suddenly hurled back into space, allowing the climate to cool further. The newborn icecaps then expanded, reaching into normally temperate regions. And with the world brightening again, it cooled again, and again, the ice spread, and over the poles, it began to thicken.

Seven hundred million years ago, the Earth's climate collapsed. A murderous cold reached to the equator. Glaciers born on the high peaks rumbled into once-tropical valleys. The ocean froze to a depth of nearly a full kilometer, and the water beneath was black and choked of oxygen. The cold was enormous, and enduring. Without evaporation, there were no clouds or fresh snows, and the glaciers began a slow retreat. Deserts of glacial till covered the barren land, frigid winds piling up towering dunes.

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But even in the most miserable cold, volcanoes kept rumbling and churning, spitting carbon dioxide into the sky. Without rainwater or plant life, the greenhouse gas built up to staggering levels. A tipping point was reached, and the seas began to melt, and snows fell again, the glaciers growing even while the heat continued to soar.

In a matter of decades — in a geologic blink — the glaciers burned away, and the world moved from snowball to furnace.

On the Earth, climates eventually moderated. The continents gathered together and drifted away from the equator, while the aging Sun grew warmer. But with each snowball phase, earthly life was battered. Entire lines of multicellular species were pushed into extinction. The biosphere that eventually arose — the world of grass and men and jeweled beetles — owed its existence to those tiny few survivors that had clung to the deep-sea vents or swam in the hot springs on the shoulders of the great volcanoes.

But the Dawsheen world never moderated.

The largest moon of a massive gas giant, it was a blue body with tiny continents and tidal-churned tectonics. The climate continued swinging in and out of the snowball state with the precision of a pendulum clock. Predictability was a blessing. Predictability allowed the ancient Dawsheen to adapt to their suffering. Obeying the season, terrestrial plants threw spores on the wind, trusting that one in ten trillion would survive the cold drought. Animals climbed into the high mountains, building nests inside deep caves and stuffing them with thick-shelled eggs. The ocean's creatures changed their metabolisms, borrowing the slow, tiny ways of anaerobic organisms, living sluggishly in the deep darkness while the ice creaked and roared above them.

Every winter was a savage winnowing.

And every thaw left the world stripped and lifeless, defenseless and full of promise.

Surviving the winter wasn't enough. Success meant spreading quickly, producing children ready to adapt to a landscape transformed by glaciers and eruptions. Success meant being first to swim into the first dark thread of ocean seawater, and breeding first, and fending off every rival to your rapidly growing empire.

Cooperation brought the greatest successes.

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The early queens were ensembles: Species hiding together in the largest, most secure redoubts, existing as totipotent spores and fertilized eggs along with a dowry of mummified bodies and dried shit — organic wealth brought to feed and fertilize what was, in simple terms, an ark that was waiting for the next All.

That was a billion years ago.

Life on the Earth was a little more than a film, a gray tapestry woven of single-celled bacteria; while on Dawsheen, the Queen was gradually and inexorably becoming more interesting and more elaborate, evolving into an absolutely beautiful woman.

IV

"Bride of the world, Bride of the All!"

They could scarcely hear their own translators. At this penultimate moment, the city's entire population was standing along the main lane, every Dawsheen chanting in an eerily smooth chorus, the melded voices loud enough to shake stone and passionate enough to make humans shiver and smile at one another. Quee Lee turned to her husband, winking in a certain way, remarking, "It's as if we've wandered into — "

"What?" Perri shouted. "What did we — ?"

"An orgy!" she hollered. "We've stumbled across an orgy!" Then she reconsidered, saying, "No, no! It's a salmon run. Coho spawning! Isn't it a little that way, Perri — ?"

Their translators screamed:

"Accept our selves, our offerings, our souls!"

The crowd was a blur, a vivid living mass of the Dawsheen lining the parade route, plus another twenty or thirty, or perhaps forty animal species visible from that little knob of basalt. The bulky species stood alone, clambering little bodies dancing on their shoulders and backs. Limbs rose high. Every creature was full-grown, and many were elderly. Why make children when this world was about to end? Trembling bodies shoved against their neighbors, forming two astonishingly straight lines. Nothing mattered but the Queen. Nothing else existed. The exhausted vanguard of Her entourage moved onto the wide lane. The intelligent Dawsheen led the procession, each wearing elaborate ceremonial robes

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and carrying relics from great, long-past Alls. Behind them, big work-grazers pulled wagons filled with a tiny sampling of Her wealth — sacks of blessed soil, and armored plates made from titanium and cultured diamond, and slabs of pasteurized fat sealed in plastic, and one long banner lit from within by electrified gases, showing the redoubt that had already been prepared for Her at the top of the cavern, at the birthplace of the Long River.

"There...I see Her...!" Quee Lee cried out.

The Queen was being lifted up the last long flight of stairs, rising over the cliff's lip at a slow pace that might have been majestic, but more likely signaled great fatigue. She was huge. Her body looked like an enormous caterpillar, turquoise and gold plates shining in the snowy light. What might be legs were wrapped securely around the trunk of a sky-holder tree. Handles and saddles had been fastened to the tree, and every possible species helped carry Her. Work-grazers and Dawsheen and bounce-maidens and three-cautions and whisper-winds; and in the middle of the tree trunk, a pair of massive hill-shakers strode along, each with six pillar-like legs, each leg stepping with practiced care, setting the pace for the others.

A centuries-long climb was nearly finished.

But the achievement wasn't quite as astonishing as it seemed. The sky-holder tree was mostly hollow, saving weight. And the Queen's body was nearly as empty. The carapace was a tough, enduring contrivance — diamond fibers woven into a structure able to endure the angry weight of entire glaciers. The Queen's true self was astonishingly small. But as Perri liked to explain, "It makes sense, being small. A little body is easier to move and protect. A little body can fall into hibernation faster, and then awaken first." Over the recent centuries, on various occasions, he had reminded his wife, "Really, you don't need much space to hold a world's genetics. A sampling of every species...a few million examples, each no larger than a single cell...well, you could hold that treasure inside one trustworthy hand...."

The thundering chants reached a higher, brighter pitch. It felt as if the cliff were shaking, ready to collapse. And then the enormous Queen was in view, and the mood changed, the crowd falling into a perfect, sudden silence.

Quee Lee sighed, and shivered.

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Perri looked back across the city. Thousands of spore-pods began to leap high, home-trees and vines and the living lanes throwing their genetics into the damp, snowy wind. And in the next instant, the pods detonated, filling the air with talc-like dust. Perri coughed, and Quee Lee sneezed. But the natives remained silent, focused on this ultimate moment. As the Queen passed, each Dawsheen stepped forward. The two lines pushed inward, bodies clambering on top of bodies. With the aliens came the rough equivalent of rats and scorpions, dogs and sparrows, and underfoot, furry worms and tiny bugs. With a quiet solemnity, every creature opened its clothes or parted its fur — in some way exposing itself — needle-like penises and distended vaginas delivering their cargo with a minimum of fuss, and just enough bliss.

Quee Lee nudged Perri with her elbow. She gestured, and he followed her gaze. Half a dozen giant wind-masters were still trying to finish their long climb. Exhausted, ancient, and nearly starved, their movements were weak but precise, using a last little updraft somewhere in the cold, dense air. Perri began to say, "Too bad." They were majestic creatures. He had hoped they would see at least one of them glide in above the parade; that would make the spectacle complete.

Not today, he thought.

Then a new motion grabbed his gaze. Another wind-master was skimming along the edge of the cliff, just above the falls. It was black and elegantly slender, and large even at a distance. After a moment, it flapped the wings and twisted its body, and the body rose, rising up level with Perri.

He nudged her with an elbow, and nodded.

Quee Lee whispered a few words.

"What — ?"

"Stronger," she whispered. "Than the others."

It was. The enormous flyer was powerful enough to flap hard, gaining velocity as it continued to ascend. Suddenly it was above them, vanishing into the snow and spores. For an instant, Perri thought he could hear air moving fast. Which was ridiculous. The deep rumbling of the waterfall wouldn't let him hear anything as subtle as wings...and then, inside that same instant, he heard what seemed to be a new chant, unexpected and sloppy, and not half as loud as the Gathering had managed before.

"No, no, no!" their translators cried out.

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And then with a bluntly descriptive voice, the machines shouted, "PANIC. THIS IS THE SOUND OF. PANIC."

Again, there was a rush of air overhead.

Almost too late, Perri looked back at the Queen. A strange little fire had erupted along Her back, a haze of blue plasmas brightening, lifting up like a flap of iridescent flesh. There was a clean sharp *crack*, and the Queen collapsed into three pieces. The carapace shattered and fell off its perch on the sky-holder tree, and out of the clouds came something narrow, black, and wingless. It dove hard and stopped instantly, absorbing that terrific momentum; and an instant later, mechanical hands delicately reached inside the Queen, retrieving a squirming gray body not much larger than a human being.

Quee Lee moaned, calling out, "What is it — ?"

The machine had lifted again, vanishing into the falling snows.

"What was that?" she asked, more puzzled than worried, more disappointed than angry.

Perri said nothing.

He was staring at the enormous panic — arms swaying in agony; voices cursing wildly; waves of tiny sparrow-like flyers struggling to chase after their stolen Queen — and then with an expression that looked a little amused, and thrilled, and focused, he turned to his wife and shook his head, telling her, "Stay with me. Stay close!"

V

The building only resembled its neighbors — a home-tree façade encompassing a set of rounded rooms that pretended to have been shaped by determined worms. But every surface was cultured diamond braced with threads of hyperfiber. The furnishings had a slick, impervious feel promising durability as well as ease of cleaning. One of the back rooms, visible at the end of a remarkably straight hallway, was enclosed with hyperfiber bars — horizontal, not vertical — and inside that cage stood half a dozen curious Dawsheen, with a single harum scarum sitting behind them, threatening to crush anyone who came near her.

Many things in the universe were not universal, Perri reflected. But police stations very nearly were.

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"I have no authority," said the officer on duty.

Quee Lee halfway laughed, admitting, "And I'm not precisely sure why we're here."

The Dawsheen looked at Perri. "I have no authority," he repeated. "Do you claim special knowledge about a criminal incident?"

"Maybe," Perri said.

The alien spoke, and three separate translators asked, "Which criminal incident?" with a flat, incurious sound.

"The kidnapping."

The translators struggled to deliver that simple concept. A blur of barks and tweets ended with the station's translator taking charge of the interview. Its AI asked Perri directly, "Do you mean the Queen?"

"Yes."

"Do you know Her whereabouts?"

"No." Then he shook his head, deciding that wasn't quite true. "Or maybe I do. Maybe."

"But you have some useful knowledge?"

"I think so. Yes."

The officer sat listening to the conversation between machine and man. One leg was thrown behind his tilted bench, while the others were locked in front. Every hand lay in a pile on the little desk set before him. He wore a greenish-black uniform of densely woven yarns. His face was covered with bristly golden hairs. Every eye was open, but there was no way to determine if he was even a little interested in what was being said.

Finally, he muttered a few syllables.

"My superiors are searching for Her," he offered. "I have no authority, but I will listen to whatever you say."

"I saw some men," Perri began. "Human men. My wife and I noticed them before the Gathering."

Quee Lee glanced at him, sensing some little portion of his reasoning.

"I recognized one of those men," Perri claimed.

"What did you know?" the officer inquired.

"He's a smuggler, on occasion."

Quee Lee was not particularly surprised, nor disappointed. She knew her husband well enough to leave this matter until later. For now, it was

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enough to make a dismissive cluck with her tongue, smiling and staring back at the jail cell.

"You recognized this smuggler?"

"I think so," said Perri. "Yes."

"His appearance was familiar to you?"

"No."

"No?"

"His face had been modified. Disguised. Smugglers have a thousand methods — "

"But you recognized his voice," the officer pressed.

"No. It's a new voice, and that also means nothing. Every time that I've seen him, he sounds different." Perri cut the air with one hand — a Dawsheen gesture promising that he was telling the truth. "I've known this man for thousands of years. I know his manners, his methods. I know how he moves his hands, and his tongue. Lately, he's been working with a pair of brothers. The fourth man in their party was a stranger, and he seemed to be in charge."

Like any cop, the Dawsheen had to ask, "How is it, sir, that you are familiar with a notorious smuggler?"

"I know just about everybody," Perri replied without hesitation.

Quee Lee flinched. It took all of her willpower to say nothing.

"I have no authority," the Dawsheen said once more. "My superiors are searching upriver. The Queen will be recovered soon. Soon." An unreadable expression passed across the narrow, bristly face. "In a matter of moments," he promised. "But you can be sure, I have already relayed your words to every one of my superiors."

"How can you be sure?" Quee Lee blurted. "That you'll find her, I mean."

"Every escape route is closed," Perri offered. Turning to his wife, he explained, "Up and down the Long River, every tunnel and little doorway has been closed. And sealed. No one can get inside this cavern, much less escape." Then he looked at the officer, asking, "Is that why you're confident?"

The Dawsheen replied and the translator snapped, "Yes."

"Loon Fairbanks," Perri offered. "That's the smuggler's name. And believe me, he anticipated everything. He knows all about your security

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systems. Your psychology. The weather, and every other factor. Loon will have a good, solid plan. That plan's unfolding now. If those men and your Queen are still inside the cavern, it won't be for long. And if he can get Her out, what chance do you have to find Her inside the Great Ship?"

The officer fell silent, his white eyes dulling slightly.

"I can help you," Perri said. "I want to help you. I don't particularly like that man, and I wish to be of service to your Queen."

The alien stood abruptly.

"I have the authority," he shouted with an astonishing energy. A cabinet jumped open, a hyperfiber vest and two weapons flying across the room. He put on the vest and pocketed the weapons, and then one of his little hands touched a control, causing the cage in the back room to open. The horizontal bars fell into a neat triangular pile at the feet of the prisoners. In a near-scream, he told the Dawsheen, "You have been freed. Go home and wait for the glacier."

The harum scarum rose to her feet, towering above the rest. From her speaking mouth, she snarled, "What about me?"

"I do not like you. You have earned my scorn and my distrust, and if you can live with that burden, you also are welcome to leave."

VI

Slowly, slowly, the Dawsheen biosphere grew more sophisticated, intricate, and robust. The brutal winters both delayed and inspired the wheel of evolution. There were never many species, but each was highly adaptable. Native genetics were intricate and miserly. No gene, useful or otherwise, was thrown away. Who could guess when or how one of these developmental oddities might become precious?

In little steps, intelligence arose. Simple civilizations flickered into existence — in the scattered valleys, typically — and each was summarily crushed under the next river of ice. Yet there are advantages in the occasional Death. Wipe your world clean and begin again; what society wouldn't relish that chance now and again? The young Dawsheen began to educate their Queens, leaving them with instructions. Each All began with hints and advice, and clear warnings left behind by the wise departed. Each All blossomed with the help of thousands of past Alls. Every new city

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was superior to its forebearers. Every new society was quicker to grow and more likely to remain at peace. Gradually, the Dawsheen acquired industry and high technology. Like humanity, they cobbled together enormous telescopes — radio ears listening to alien gossip. With that burst of knowledge, they built starships and found empty worlds. But where most spacefarers embraced some flavor of immortality, the Dawsheen resisted. Their winters and the cleansing glaciers were too important, too deeply embedded in their bones. They bolstered their lifespans, but only to a few thousand years. And when they learned to control their climate, they made their winters as brief as possible. But they wouldn't surrender their most powerful myth: The Dawsheen regarded themselves as creatures of endless change, born from a world of relentless reinvention. The occasional Death was a blessing, and each new All was fresh and full of potentials. In their lustrous white eyes, most alien species seemed humdrum, and stodgy. And pleasantly, even deliciously, contemptible, too.

VII

Perri sat in the back of the little ship studying his own holo-map.

"You may examine our map," the Dawsheen remarked. He was sitting at the ship's controls, carefully touching nothing. The AI pilot was keeping them close to the river's face, ice piled on ice, tiny leads betraying the cold black water beneath. "My map is accurate to the millimeter, and updated by the instant."

"Thank you," Perri replied, his voice distracted. "But no, thank you."

Quee Lee glanced over her shoulder. She was sitting beside the Dawsheen, her robe pulled snug across her squared shoulders. Suspicious and a little amused, she watched her husband as he stared into that maze of colored lines and pale spaces. "My husband is very proud of his map," she mentioned. "He loves it more than he loves me, I think. There are entire months when I can't pry his nose away from it."

Perri acted oblivious, enthralled with his own narrow business. The tiny projector in one hand threw up a comprehensive view of the Long River, and with his free hand, he poked and prodded. For no obvious reason, certain points needed to be enlarged and studied in detail. He let

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his instincts steer him. Quietly, he explained, "You have an enormous area to search. The river starts under the ship's hull — here — and twists and turns its way back and forth, down down down, into your little sea. The drop is nearly three thousand kilometers. Except near its source, it's a lazy river. A couple meters down for every kilometer crossed. The river is nearly one and a half million kilometers long. The longest river in the galaxy, no doubt. And since the cavern has an average width of twelve kilometers, your living area is about equal to the lands on your home world...."

"It is a satisfying relationship," the officer interjected.

Passage on the Great Ship was expensive, even for a single entity. To lease an enormous habitat required frightful sums. The Dawsheen had surrendered titles to half a hundred worlds — difficult planets with climates too stable or seas too tiny to feed deep ice ages; perfect for an inventive ape that could terraform, then colonize, making homes for billions of prosperous souls.

"This is a maze," Perri cautioned. "A huge and intricate, beautiful maze. And I don't think you can search it. Not in the time left, no."

For the umpteenth time, the officer remarked, "We have sealed every exit. There is no way to escape."

"You're searching upriver," Perri continued. "But they could have taken the Queen downstream."

"No," the Dawsheen replied. "We tracked them coming this way."

Perri said, "I bet so."

He touched an approaching sector, asking for an enlargement. A thousand square miles of ice and raw stone appeared before him. And again, he fingered portions of the map, gazing into the wasteland's corners.

Quee Lee smiled gently.

"It just occurred to me," she said. "I don't know your name."

The Dawsheen uttered something quick and soft. His translator said, "Lastborn Teek."

With genuine sadness, she repeated, "Lastborn."

"A common name," the Dawsheen explained. "As Firstborn is common at the beginning of an All."

The river was entirely frozen. And the weather continued to worsen, snow falling in thick white waves, hurricane winds trying to push them

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out of the sky. The worst gusts made the ship tremble. But shape-shifting wings and powerful engines kept them on course. Lastborn studied his controls and listened to reports from distant search parties, empty hands closing and opening again with a palpable nervousness.

Quee Lee looked over her shoulder.

"Darling?"

Perri didn't react.

She said, "Darling" again, with a certain weight.

He noticed. A soft sigh proved it, and his eyes blinked, his poking hand held steady for a moment.

"What are you thinking, darling?"

He wasn't sure. Until the question had been asked, his thoughts were utterly invisible to him.

"Our friend deserves to know." She reached back. Her hand was small and warm, soft in every way, little fingers wrapped around his elegant young hand as she pulled gently, insistently, saying again, "Lastborn deserves to know."

"The flyer is up in the glacier," Perri guessed. "It's going to be buried, but not that deep. Camouflaged, but not that well."

Lastborn said nothing.

"And there's going to be at least three trails worth following. Heat trails, boot prints. Signs of another flyer, probably. That's how it will look."

Alien fingers tightened into knots.

"Have there been any ransom demands?"

With a touch, the Dawsheen took the controls away from the AI pilot. In a near-whisper, he spoke for a long moment. Then his translator admitted, "The flyer was discovered a little while ago. It was left empty, hiding in a rock crevice. Not in the ice."

Quee Lee smiled with a nervous little pride.

"The flyer was empty almost from the beginning," Perri explained. "If I was stealing Her...I think I would have slipped the Queen into a second ship. A better ship. Then I'd double back. Somewhere below the city — "

"Where?" Lastborn asked.

Then in the next instant, he reminded Perri, "Every passageway out of our world is closed, and secured, and — "

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"Here," Perri interrupted.

In an instant, he pulled his view back a hundred kilometers, passing over the city and dropping with the enormous falls. "A lot of things in this universe are difficult," he explained, enlarging the map again. Beside and beneath the Dawsheen cavern were more caverns and tunnels, plus innumerable fissures too tiny to wear any name. "But cutting a new door isn't difficult," he muttered. "In fact, with the right tools, it's about the easiest job that there is."

VIII

Ten thousand years ago, Perri came home from a long wandering.

His wife greeted him in every usual way. She made love to him, and he returned the pleasure. She fed him and let him sleep, then woke him with fond hands, using his body until both of them were spent, breathless, and dehydrated. Then they staggered into Quee Lee's garden — a many-hectare room filled with jungle and damp hot air — and naked, they kneeled and drank their fill from a quick clear stream. Where the stream pooled, they swam and bathed, tired legs barely able to carry them back onto shore. With a voice frank and earthy, Quee Lee spoke to her husband. She explained how much she had missed him. She had craved his voice and stories and his pretty mouth against her mouth, and in her dreams, she had played cruel, sordid games with his cock and fat balls. She never spoke to anyone else with those words. No other lover, not even to pretend. Perri had been gone longer than usual — several years, and without a word. "Where were you?" she finally asked. "Where did you take that lovely little dick of yours?"

Perri laughed, gently and happily. Then with a matching voice, he described his adventures. With some like-minded idiots, he had explored one of the Great Ship's engines — a moon-sized conglomeration of machines with pumps as big as cities and sentries lurking at every turn. That consumed most of his time. Then he went gambling, playing twenty-deck poker with a platoon of humans and harum scarums and Blue Passions and AI souls. In less than sixteen days and nights, Perri managed to surrender most of the allowance given him by his very generous wife. He had let himself look embarrassed and a little desperate, smiling

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painfully at the better gamblers, asking for one more chance. "One more hand? With a fresh twenty-decks, maybe?" He charmed and begged, and of course when the cards were dealt, every suspicious eye was fixed on Perri. But his awful luck held. He had nothing. A Blue Passion at the far end of the table gathered up the enormous pot with her suckered fingers; and three days later, in an entirely different corner of the Ship, the same alien surrendered Perri's share of the profits, along with her weepy thanks.

"She was in awful trouble," Perri explained. "She absolutely needed that money."

"You're so noble," Quee Lee teased. "A woman in need — "

"Anyway," he interrupted. With his earnings, he bought a used slash-car, and in the depths of the Ship, in a looping tunnel used only for racing, he had raced. And won. And won again. He described driving the car, hands wrapped around an imaginary wheel, the stone and hyperfiber walls blurring around him. Then just as Quee Lee was about to ask to see his new toy, Perri admitted, "I crashed it. Mangled it, and myself. I was clinically dead for a full week. It took most of my winnings to rebuild my body. The autodocs asked if I wanted improvements, but I honestly couldn't think of one. Being perfect, as I am."

Both laughed.

And then, with a very slight change of tone, Perri said, "The Long River." He rolled onto his back, asking, "Do you know much about it?"

She said, "I've heard it mentioned. Yes."

"And the Dawsheen?"

She knew about them, but not much.

Perri explained the snowball world and its enduring biosphere. Quietly, slowly, he described the city perched beside the eleven-kilometer falls, and its inhabitants, and the amazing parade. A Queen had been carried past. An entire world gave Her its seed. And after the Queen was gone, safely entombed in a redoubt high above the blue ice, Perri had waited, watching the river freeze solid while the enormous snows fell, thousands of Dawsheen buried in their homes, happily falling into the eternal sleep — their bones and souls crushed beneath the newborn glacier.

It was a sad, spectacular thing to witness.

The voice that began soft and happy turned softer and awed. Perri was

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lying naked on the bank of the stream, on his back, staring at the illusion of stars floating inside the room's high ceiling. With her frank, practiced hands, his wife measured his mood, and when nothing happened, she admitted defeat. She curled up beside him, and tenderly asked, "What happens to the Queen?"

"She waits," he promised. "Safe and high, she waits. Everything below her is frozen now, glaciers stretching down to the sea. But in another century or so, spring comes. The heat soars, and the ice melts, and inside that tough shell of hers, she rides the flood down to the sea."

"And then?" she whispered.

"The Queen is a repository," Perri reminded her. "She's a living, sentient ark. But she only holds the land-dwelling species. Fishes and sea creatures...they rely on a second ark...a different sort of body that's waiting under the sea ice...."

"A second Queen?"

"Yes," he said. Then in his next breath, "No. It's not a Queen. It's something else entirely — "

"Her King?"

He said, "No." And then with a second thought, he allowed, "Maybe. In a certain fashion, I suppose so."

Quee Lee slid her hand across his newborn chest and belly. In countless ways, she was grateful that Perri had survived. There were moments when she wanted to beg him to remain home, giving her the same devotion that he willingly gave to his adventures. But that would never happen. Outside of a daydream, there was no way for that to happen. Rubbing the bare chest, she took a deep breath, and finally, with a quiet firm and determined voice, she surprised both of them.

"Take me," she said.

She said, "The next time winter comes. Show me."

Here was a fresh twist on a very old conversation. Perri tried to smile, reminding her, "You don't normally enjoy my adventures."

"I want to meet the Dawsheen," she persisted. "I want to see their Queen."

"Maybe someone should take you," he allowed.

"Maybe I should go myself."

"It's going to be cold and uncomfortable," he promised. "Watching a

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world die...it's going to be grueling. Do you think you're strong enough to endure that sort of fun?"

"And you think you're strong?" she countered.

Then with her smallest finger, she touched the corner of a newborn eye, gathering up the glistening remains of a tear.

IX

The world was white, and damned. The snow fell in waves, burying the dead lanes and high roofs, wiping away every last trace of the city. Huddled inside their homes — inside their graves — its citizens could do nothing but wait for any good news, nursing little hopes amid wild despair. Only the river held the thinnest promise of life. Flat slabs of ice moved in a great parade, immune to fear or caution, holding their pace until their prows pushed out into the air, and dipped, each slab falling with smooth inevitability, dropping over the brink of the falls, still floating on the face of the water as it plunged into a cold, fierce maelstrom.

Lastborn took them over the brink, and down.

Eleven kilometers of air and spray and thunder lay below them. Behind the water stood the basalt cliff. Sensors began working, hunting for things that were surely trying to hide — a few bodies and probably some machinery, plus every trick of camouflage that a smuggler could drag along.

The sensors found plenty, none of it remarkable. Each vertical kilometer was examined in detail, and then the Dawsheen took them back toward the sky, flying along the waterfall's lip, peppering the current with tiny probes better suited for other, easier jobs.

Perri ignored the search, or pretended to ignore it.

"No one is here," Lastborn declared.

Perri was squinting into his elaborate map, studying an empty maze of tunnels situated on the far side of the cliff.

Again, the Dawsheen said, "There is no one." Then with an improving sense of things, he turned to Quee Lee, confessing, "My tools and patience are exhausted. I will leave you inside the jail, where you will be safe — "

"No."

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Both of them said that word. Quee Lee spoke with a begging tone, while Perri nearly shouted.

Then again, he said, "No." The map dissolved and he pocketed his tiny projector. "Leave us at the base of the falls," he told Lastborn. "I've got one good place to look."

"There is, I promise, no one." But the alien relented, dashing over the little knoll where the couple had watched the Gathering, then dropping fast. Where the cliff was exposed, it formed a massive black wall decorated with that single zigzagging white line. The line was the staircase covered with snow. Now and again, little shapes came into view, crawling their way up through the snow. Half a dozen secondary parades were attempting the long, hard climb. These were the Queen's little sisters. Evolution and pragmatism demanded their existence. What if disaster struck? But no Queen had been lost during the last ten thousand Alls. They were symbols only — emergency repositories of genetic matter accompanied by smaller entourages, each encasing only a fraction of the genetic wealth held by their big sister.

The base of the cliff was bare rock, the freezing mist reducing visibilities to a soggy arm's length.

"Where?" Quee Lee asked.

Perri looked at her for an instant. "Maybe you should — "

She leaped first, and again, with a half-scream, she asked, "Where?"

"We'll work our way along the base," he allowed. "Move closer to the falls."

The rocks were treacherous, slick and jumbled. Sensing the terrain, their boots sprouted crampons. Their robes shed the freezing water, channeling it off to their downstream side. Too late, Quee Lee turned to say, "Thank you," to Lastborn. But he had already lifted off. Then to her husband, with a modest concern, she asked, "Won't the water crush us? Or the falling ice?"

"Probably," he said, stepping into the lead. "But most of the ice is slush before it reaches the bottom, and the river's down to a trickle. Compared to what it was."

"You pray," she said.

He laughed grimly, saying, "Help me pray. That just about doubles its effectiveness."

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They marched. Rock litter and massive boulders quickly vanished beneath a frosting of new ice. In a sense, it was an easy walk. The cliff was always to their left, always close. A foot might plant wrong, but the boot invented some way to faultlessly hold the balance. Sometimes Perri moved ahead too quickly, and vanished. But later, as Quee Lee grew accustomed to the pace, she began to catch him, a gloved hand set firmly against his back, reminding him of her presence and urging him to hurry.

At some ill-defined moment, they moved behind the great falls.

Half a kilometer later, they were utterly blind. Their robes were pushing against their functional limits. The falling sleet sounded like an avalanche of gravel. Quee Lee refused to quit, but she was regretting her stubbornness. Never again, never, would she let herself ignore her rational instincts, following after Perri in one of his little miseries....

Perri stopped in the wet blackness. Crouching, he activated his holomap. But instead of checking their position, he ordered up one of the Ship's main reactors. Then he magnified that portion of the map, peering inside the reaction chamber. The light was sudden, brilliant and pure. This was a traveler's trick: Dial to a bright place, and let the map illuminate your surroundings.

The image couldn't be brighter. Draining the projector of its charge, it threw a white glow against the base of the cliff. They could see a cavern, or maybe some overhanging spur of rock. A glimmering light came back at them. Perri stood and walked toward the glimmer. It brightened gradually, and lifted, and after a long while, Quee Lee looked up to see motion overhead. She was watching two figures apparently walking on their heads.

The ceiling was hyperfiber.

The bones of the Great Ship lay exposed. Tumbling waters must have chiseled away the basalt, revealing the supporting strata. She looked at herself — a sloppy, pale version of herself — and then she looked ahead again, hurrying after Perri, the air drying and the roar of the sleet falling into an angry rumble.

She didn't see the kidnappers.

Perri slowed and dimmed his map, and he kneeled, saying nothing. With a hand in the air, he asked her to drop beside him. Then he extinguished the map, letting a second light burst into view.

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In the distance, the cave ended with a wall of low-grade hyperfiber. Three men stood before it, manipulating a plasma drill, using slow measured bursts to peel away the barrier in millimeter bites. Work fast, and someone might notice the energy discharges. Work too slow, and someone might stumble into their hiding place. The men seemed perfectly attuned to their task, urgency and patience joined together. Burn, clean the new surface, and wait. Burn, clean, wait. Burn, clean, wait. The rhythm was steady and relentless, and very nearly silent. The only voice belonged to the man who had yelled at the Dawsheen waiter. "Now," he would say every minute. And the other two men would step behind opaque shields, letting the drill spit out another carefully crafted pulse.

"How did they get here — ?" Quee Lee began to ask.

"We just walked past their ship," Perri interrupted, expecting the question. "It looks like a boulder. Because it is. A big hollowed out rock, reequipped and very sneaky."

She nodded, and squinted.

The drill pulsed, but she couldn't see what she wanted to see.

"The Queen — ?" she began.

"I don't know," he admitted.

A minute later, the man called out, "Now."

And again, the drill pulsed. This time, Quee Lee happened to glance to her right, spotting two figures. The human was sitting on a flat slab of gray-black stone. The Queen was sitting, too. Was it Her? They weren't that far away. In the gloom, she resembled any Dawsheen. But there was a smoothness to her features, a plainness, like a hurried sketch of something infinitely more complicated. She was wearing a plain cloak, nothing about her distinctive. There was no hair or plumage, no flourishes. She was sitting across from her kidnapper. Again, the drill pulsed, and the hyperfiber continued to glow. With a voice that wasn't right for a Dawsheen, the Queen said a few words. The man was wearing an odd wide smile, and he said a few words of his own, his voice sounding like the bleating of a child's toy.

Quee Lee tried to make sense of the scene.

And then she felt something, or heard something. For no conscious reason, she looked back over her shoulder, turning in time to see a boot perched on an adjacent rock, and the trousers tucked into the boot, the

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trousers lifting into a rounded body that was wearing the dark, thoroughly drenched uniform of a Dawsheen police office.

She put her elbow into Perri's side.

He started to turn.

Lastborn aimed his weapon with a practiced touch, but his nervousness fought against an easy shot. It took another moment for him to feel sure enough to fire. The gun drained itself in one full blast, and the world turned white, the screaming ball of plasmas rolling toward its target, a set of transparent diamond shields absorbing the blast, keeping the Queen from being incinerated.

Perri said, "Shit," and stood.

Lastborn unholstered his second weapon, and with that same nervous earnestness, aimed at the Queen.

Her shields had evaporated. She tried to run, and the human threw himself between Her and the attacker — a fearless, useless gesture — and Perri managed to throw a loose rock overhand, catching Lastborn on the back of his head.

The second blast hit the ceiling and faded.

In reflex, Quee Lee ran, sprinting at Lastborn.

The alien was working with his first gun, trying to find enough residual power for a second shot.

"Why?" she screamed. "Why?"

She grabbed the lead foot, and yanked, accomplishing nothing.

"Why — ?"

And then what felt like a great hand descended on them, and there was nothing else to see.

X

Every morning, She would walk with her instructors, and listen. The beach was sand made by the glaciers and living wind-reefs built from the sand. The Sea was blue and warm and just a little salty. When her instructors spoke, the tropical blue air filled with words about duty and history and honor and the great noble future. The duty was Her own, demanding and essential; while the honor was entirely theirs. Who wouldn't wish to nourish and educate the newborn Queen? Together,

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they shared a history reaching back into a mist of conjecture and dream; while the future lay before Her, as real as anything can be that has not yet been born.

She was an empty vessel walking beside the warm blue water — a large vessel filled with countless empty spaces, each space begging to be jammed full of important treasure.

Her powers were obvious. Every animal fell silent and still as she passed, staring at her simple body with the purest longing. Every bush and fruited blade threw out its spores, hoping to find Her blessing. Even the tiniest microbe struggled to reach her, crawling wildly across a dampened grain of quartz while one of Her vast and noble feet rested on the sand.

The Queen's little sisters didn't elicit such dramatic responses. One day, She looked back at them and at their own little entourages, and with a simple curiosity, She asked, "What will happen to them? What is their future?"

Her first instructor was an elderly Dawsheen woman. She answered with a dismissive tone, as if to say, "What happens to them does not matter." But then, sensing the Queen wasn't satisfied, she explained, "They will follow you, always. And hibernate in their own safe havens. And your children will eat their sleeping bodies. Except for the one or two of them who will be sent away — "

"Sent where?"

"Another world, perhaps." The face was full of indifference. The little sisters couldn't be less important to this old woman. "We roam the galaxy for a purpose," she reminded her student, gesturing to the illusion of a blue sky. "At this moment, my people are searching for suitably empty worlds."

Even at that early age, the Queen had the good sense to say nothing else.

Then there was a different walk, on an entirely different day. She sensed eyes staring and a silence. But the stare didn't come from the trees or soil this time. She looked out at the little waves, and what resembled a mossy stone bobbed in the surf, a pair of enormous black eyes watching nothing but Her.

She had never seen one of the Others.

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For the briefest instant, with a mixture of curiosity and desire, She returned the gaze. And then her instructor covered Her eyes with every hand, and a tight sudden voice warned her, "It should watch your sisters, not you.

"That one is not yours," the old woman cautioned.

"Your Magnificence...your Other has already been chosen...infinitely suited for You and Your glorious duty...please, please, turn your eyes away...that Other is sick, and peculiar, and you do not want to know anything more about it...!"

XI

Perri woke slowly. "There's a general alert," someone said. Then after a pause, the same voice said, "Shit."

He pried his eyes open. And breathed. His pain told him that he still had hands and feet, and an intact body. His skin was warm and bare. His arms and legs were lashed down. Someone sat beside him, similarly restrained. Quee Lee. Was she awake? Maybe. He wasn't certain. Then he looked at two figures sitting on the floor opposite him — a human hand lay hidden inside the Queen's Dawsheen-like hands, and what was meant to look like a human face betrayed a mixture of bliss and simple horror.

Suddenly, finally, Perri understood.

Again, the voice said, "Shit."

The male creature sitting before him spoke in a whisper, and a translator buried in his false throat asked, "What is wrong now?"

The smugglers sat in the front of the little cap-car, each eavesdropping on a different sliver of the security net. Loon's voice said, "Shit," a third time. And then he turned and grimaced, claiming, "We'll slip past anyway. I've got emergency routes waiting. I've beaten these general alarms plenty of times."

Quee Lee stirred.

Quietly, she called to her husband.

Perri nestled against her. "You're all right now."

"And you?"

He didn't answer. With a rapt intensity, he stared at the Queen, and after a moment, he asked Her, "Why?"

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The man-figure looked at him now.

"Why?"

Neither entity answered that deceptively simple question.

Then Loon threw up his arms, saying, "This shouldn't have happened. If you'd let me kill that Dawsheen — "

The Queen bleated, and her translator said, "No."

"No killing," said her companion. "I explained — "

"An old, doomed Dawsheen. Good as dead already." Loon shook his head, frustrated and enraged, and helpless. "But of course we had to leave him. We had to give him the chance to get off a warning."

Again, Perri asked, "Why?"

Quee Lee was naked. Her robe, like Perri's, had been taken away, along with every link to their buried nexuses. But they were unhurt. Loon was a smuggler. In the right circumstance, he might kill an alien, but murdering another human being was an entirely different crime.

"I don't understand," Perri confessed. "Explain this to me. Why?"

Quee Lee said, "Love."

Dipping her head, she said, "Don't you see? The two of them...in some sense...they're in love with each other...!"

Perri shook his head, a thin laugh breaking out. "Except that's not what I'm asking them."

Now both aliens stared at him. Wary, but curious.

"I know what you want," Perri claimed. "You want each other. You're hoping to escape, to get onboard one of the little starship taxis heading somewhere else...another world, and freedom...and that's why you've gone to all this work and risk — "

"Yes," the Queen rumbled.

"And that's why they want you to die," said Perri. "You're a traitor, in their eyes. A danger. An abomination!"

"Shut up," Loon told him.

"But you're not dangerous," Perri continued, "and you're not any kind of abomination. Believe me, I understand. All you want is to be together. You want only what Queens and Others have wanted from the beginning of time. An empty world, a fresh beginning, and the chance to realize your own future...."

Loon started to say "Shut up" again.

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But the human figure lifted a hand, in warning. And with a smooth male voice, it said, "We have a beautiful, beautiful world to build."

"I can believe that," Perri replied instantly, without any doubt.

The Queen spoke, the musical voice diluted into the inadequate words, "A new world unlike any. A lovely, elegant All!"

An alarm sounded, loud and urgent.

Loon cursed and abruptly changed course.

Quee Lee leaned forward, her lovely face smiling at them. "It must be very important to you, to sacrifice so much. It's the only thing that matters in your lives, I would think."

The Queen said, "Yes."

Despite the simple translation, Her voice held a longing and a sad desperation and the faint, dying hope that something worthy would come out of all this crazy wanting.

Again, Perri said, "I still want to know why."

They stared at him, puzzled.

"Why did you ever hire Loon Fairbanks? Why did you think he was going to be your salvation?"

No answer came.

Then Loon rose to his feet, telling everybody, "Will you just shut the hell up now!"

"That man smuggles objects, and he's not even the best at that." Perri shook his head with a growling disappointment. "You needed the finest. You deserved nothing less!"

Quietly, the Other asked, "Who is the finest?"

"Me. I am."

Silence.

"What you should do," Perri advised, "is fire Loon. Dismiss him, and do it now. This minute. Then I'll hire him and his crew as my subcontractors, and I'll try to get you what you desire, and deserve."

The Queen spoke, no translation offered.

With the tone of a sorry confession, her partner/mate admitted, "But we have no more money to give."

"Goodness, that's no obstacle," Quee Lee blurted. Then she grinned and patted her husband on the bare knee, exclaiming; "Believe me. This darling man works for surprisingly little!"

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XII

Her neighbors let her live alone for the next few years, enduring her shame. Her embarrassment. Her shocking notoriety. And then in a gradual but relentless process, they began to invent ways to cross paths with Quee Lee. She might be shopping in a market or walking in one of the local parks, and one of her human acquaintances from a nearby apartment would appear without warning, wearing a benign smile, muttering, "Hello," before mentioning in the same breath, "We haven't seen nearly enough of you lately." Even alone, they always spoke for the "We." That tiny word implied that each person stood among many, many like-minded souls. "We've worried about you," they might say. Or, "We miss you, Quee Lee. Come visit us, when you have the strength."

Strength wasn't a limiting issue. She couldn't remember when she had last felt this strong. And their worry was genuine, but only to a point. No, Quee Lee kept to herself for other fine reasons. She let her old friends speak among themselves, and gossip, and out-and-out spy. Only when it felt right did she begin walking the neighborhood again, visiting one or two of the wealthy souls who lived along her particular avenue. About her troubles, no one said a word. About her adventures...well, nobody could stop thinking about what had happened. She saw it in their staring faces. The wondering. The outrage. The almost comical fear that blossomed whenever they remembered that their dear friend had been involved in things illegal, violent, and strange.

About Quee Lee's husband, nobody asked. Fifty years had to pass before a woman-friend felt bold enough to say the name, "Perri," while looking at the ancient woman with a mixture of concern and simple nosiness.

"What about my husband?" Quee Lee asked.

"How is he?" the woman inquired. Then fearing that she had overstepped her bounds, she added, "Is he comfortable, where he is?"

What could she say? The truth?

Never that, no.

Instead, Quee Lee shrugged and remarked, "He's comfortable enough. And he looks reasonably contented."

"How often do you see him?"

"Every three weeks, for twenty-one minutes per visit," Quee Lee

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reported. "Those are the terms of his sentence. One visitor every twenty-one days, and the rest of his time is spent among the general population."

"You poor soul," the friend moaned. "We're all so sorry for you."

"Don't be," was Quee Lee's advice. "Really, it's not that awful. It's not even that unpleasant, considering."

The wicked truth was that Perri adored prison. He found himself surrounded by strange aliens and dangerous people, and the Ship's enormous brig was an entirely new wilderness open for his explorations. During Quee Lee's visits, he spoke in whispers, hinting at great new stories that would have to wait for another century to be told. In principle, they were supposed to be alone in the visitation chamber, but you could never feel sure about your solitude. The chamber was a hyperfiber balloon. A molecule-thick screen stood between them. Permeable to light and sound, but to nothing physical, the screen allowed them to undress and perform for each other, and sometimes that was what they did. Sometimes Quee Lee didn't care who might be watching them. And with an honest longing, she always told her husband, "I miss you. I want you. Make the years hurry up, would you?"

"I will," he always replied, his perpetual laugh quiet and sweet.

Perri's sentence was one hundred and one years. An excellent attorney and a surprisingly law-abiding record had helped reduce his punishment. What hadn't helped was his stubborn refusal to implicate any other player or players in that very peculiar crime.

For more than sixty years, none of the neighbors dared mention the crime.

It was another good friend who finally brought it up. He was sitting with Quee Lee, sitting in her little jungle and helping her drink some of her more exotic liquors, and when the drugs and silence got too much, he blurted out the words, "What in hell were you thinking?"

She knew what he meant. But to be stubborn, she asked, "When?"

"Because you had to know all about it," he argued. "You went off with Perri, on that little vacation of yours, and ship security claims that you were with him and those two Dawsheen — "

"They weren't Dawsheen," she interrupted. "They were sentient genetic repositories."

"According to the Dawsheen, they were criminals." Sixty years of waiting was erased. The man was too drunk and self-consumed to let this

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issue pass for another moment. "I saw those security digitals, Quee Lee. Everybody has."

"That isn't legal," she rumbled. "Those are confidential."

"It's a little crime," he countered. "Call the Master Captain, if you want."

She fell silent.

Again, he said, "I saw the digitals. From twenty angles, I watched your husband and that Dawsheen criminal. Sorry, I mean that sentient genetic repository criminal. Dressed up to look human, and walking with Perri and that storage trunk with the Queen stuffed inside — "

"I know what happened," she mentioned.

"Your husband was trying to slip them onboard that star-taxi. He had them past security...I don't know how...and he waved good-bye, and turned away...and then someone noticed something wrong, I guess...."

Quee Lee said nothing.

"That alien with the plasma gun. Now that was a real Dawsheen, am I right?"

"He was one of their police officers. His name was Lastborn — "

"The trunk was floating next to that human-looking repository, and then it was gone. Destroyed. The Queen was dead."

"I know."

"It was a public place, for goodness sake. Some innocent could have been hurt, or killed."

She held her tongue.

"Then the repository screamed and exposed its own weapon, and dropped to its knees, and...." His voice failed him. The memory of that human face — the agony, and the devastation — still bothered him after all these years. "He shot himself. I mean, it shot itself."

"I know."

"With a thousand innocent travelers running everywhere, screaming in absolute terror."

"I saw it myself," she confessed. "I know."

Eyes widened. "So you really were there?"

She didn't answer him.

"In disguise, were you?"

With a little finger, she wiped at her eyes.

"We've heard that your husband refused to implicate anyone else. He

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was protecting your good name, I suppose."

"Maybe."

"Protecting his sweet money tit," the man barked.

A cold moment passed. And then with a black, hard voice, Quee Lee said to her long-time friend, "Really, it would be best if you left. Now. And if you can, I think you should run. Because in another moment, or two, I'm going to find a knife, and I'm going to cut out your ugly heart."

XIII

A century and a year had passed.

Perri strolled out of the Ship's main brig, and before anything else, hugged his wife; and then together, they went on a very long journey. Like honeymooners, they stayed at various resorts and beaches and odd, out-of-the-way hotels that specialized in supplying fun to people who were accustomed to nothing else. In the middle of their travels, in full view of any watchful eyes, they rented a private suite in one of the deeper districts. For a full week, as far as any eavesdroppers could assume, they didn't leave those luxurious confines.

A hidden passageway and an unlicensed cap-car allowed two people to travel a thousand kilometers, reaching an empty corner of the Great Ship.

A second, equally anonymous cap-car carried them elsewhere.

Pressed close together, Perri and Quee Lee crawled up the narrow confines of a nameless fissure. He didn't know their precise destination. He relied on his wife to say, "Stop," and then, "There. That wall."

A hidden doorway let them pass.

The cold was abrupt, and brutal, and wonderful. The tilted floor of the cavern wore a river of blue ice. Above them, hidden in the rocks and snow, was a tiny redoubt; and fifty kilometers downstream was a brief, deep lake with just enough room for a single creature to swim in the dark, waiting for the inevitable spring.

"Another few years," Perri said.

The Queen would awaken and ride the spring floods, following her own little river to its mouth.

In this relatively tiny volume, the two Dawsheen repositories would merge into one, reshuffling and reformulating their genetics, creating an entirely new lineage of species and phyla. The basis for an entirely new

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world would blossom inside a few dozen square kilometers; and later, when the time was ripe, another new Queen and her Other would be born.

That's when Perri would finally slip them off the Ship.

When nobody was looking, he would send them to their own empty world.

"It'll be lovely," said Quee Lee. "Whatever they manage to make here, I'm sure it will be wonderful."

Perri looked across the rugged ice and snows, and then he turned, smiling happily at his wife.

"Let's walk around," he suggested.

She shivered under her robe, asking, "Now? What could we possibly find here now?"

"I don't know," he allowed with a boyish giggle. "That's why it's worth walking around." ☙

Coming Attractions

Is it any wonder that much of the best science fiction comes out of the great state of California? The vastly varied terrain of the state, from beaches to mountains, and the otherworldly nature of the place help create an environment conducive to otherworldly speculations. And then there's the fact that an actor famous for playing Conan and the Terminator is now governing the state. Next month we'll see an engaging look at California politics, corporate greed, and the human effects of scientific research in "Ultraviolet Night" by Jim Young. Don't miss this one.

Also on the docket for March is "A Peaceable Man," another story (like Paolo Bacigalupi's tale in this issue) that explores the relationships between men and dogs. Maybe there's something in the air? Or maybe it's the DVD reissue of the movie *A Boy and His Dog* that has sparked this pack of dog stories? Whatever the cause, we're lucky to reap the benefits.

Lest you think this place has gone to the dogs completely, we also promise you several upcoming stories with aliens in 'em, including contributions from James L. Cambias and Ray Vukcevich. And look for new stories soon by David Gerrold, Matthew Hughes, Peter S. Beagle, and many more. Use the reply card in this issue or log onto www.fsfmag.com to subscribe and make sure you don't miss any of the good stuff to come.

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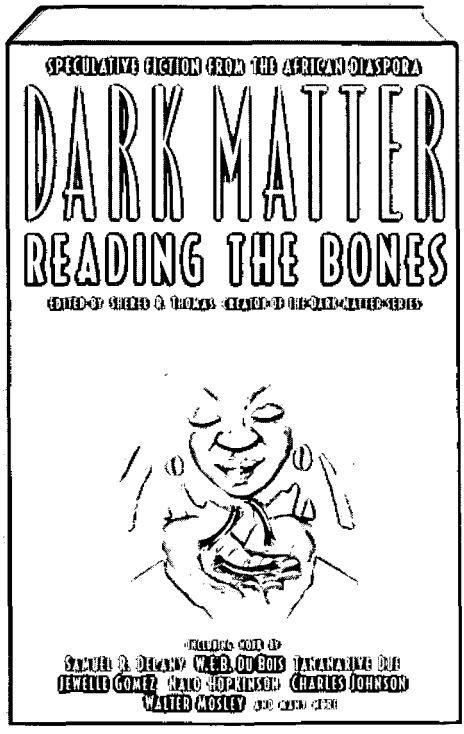

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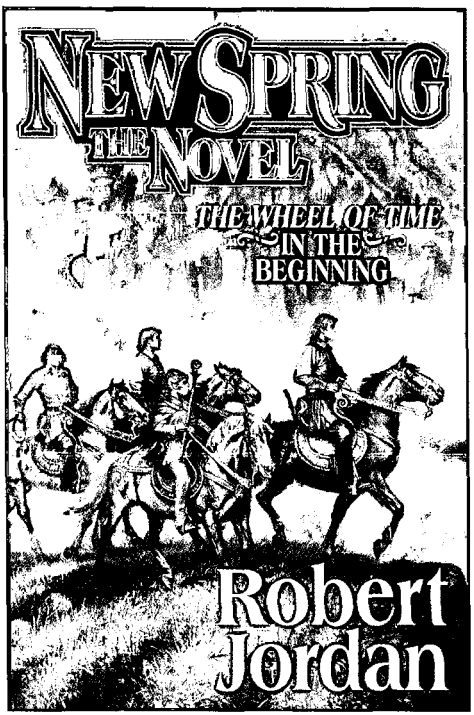

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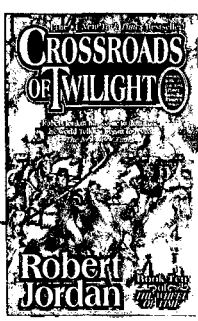

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